Irina Tokmakova

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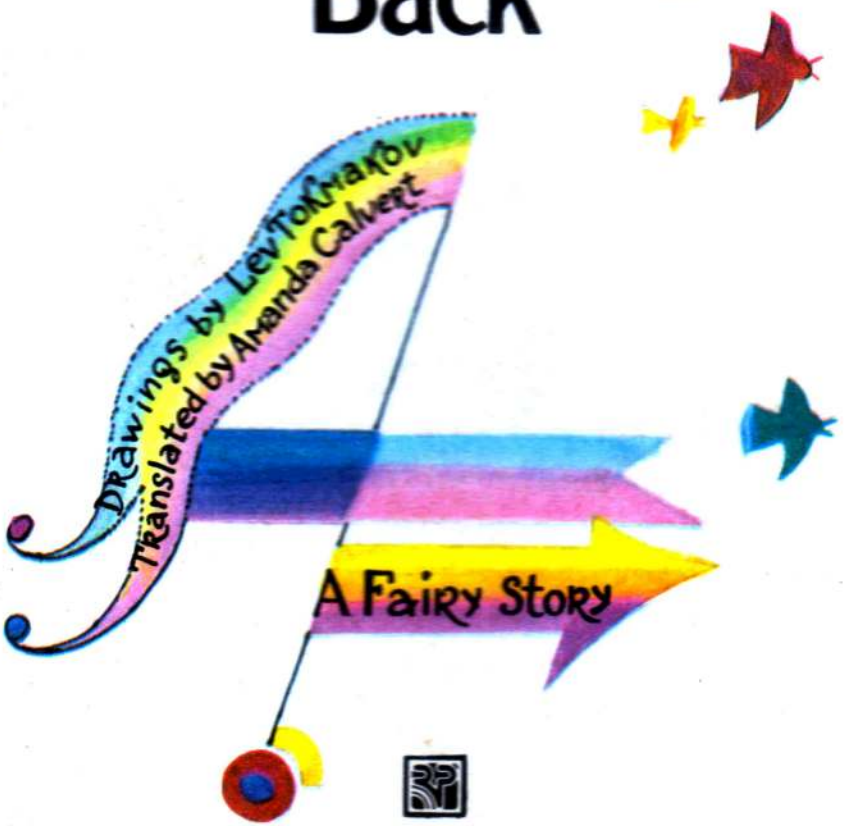

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Chapter 1. A BAD MORNING, A BAD DAY AND A VERY BAD EVENING.

In the kitchen, the porridge was burning. Papa stuck his head out of the bathroom and, razor whirring, he shouted angrily at Gran:

"Taisya, something is burning, I can smell it even in here! When will this ever..." Whereupon the bathroom door slammed shut.

Rushing to the kitchen, a distraught Gran sniffed at the porridge in the saucepan, transferred it to another saucepan which hadn't burnt, had another sniff, looked even more distraught, got out the frying pan and had just begun to fry some eggs, when the coffee boiled over.

Papa drank his coffee standing up and had a cheese sandwich for his breakfast. He wouldn't touch the omelette and Mama said angrily that he was doing it out of spite, to upset Gran. Gran's lips twitched as she plaited Paulina's hair. Paulina was the only girl in her group at the kindergarten who had plaits. All the other little girls were taken by their mamas to the hairdresser to have their hair cut. But Gran wanted Paulina to have plaits because it reminded her of her own childhood: when little girls had grown their hair long and had worn skirts instead of jeans. Though Gran didn't get her way over the jeans, she did over the plaits. She washed her granddaughter's hair herself, often with egg yolk instead of shampoo, and sometimes using another method which only she knew of. But Papa said this was all done in order to spite him. Because he couldn't stand anything old-fashioned, and considered that one should live in the present and not look back over one's shoulder or one might get a crick in the neck.

In Gran's room there was an old sideboard, a big mirror in a carved, wooden frame, and a chest of drawers. On top of the chest, which had six drawers in it, stood tall vases with dried flowers and grass in them. Paulina thought all this was very pretty, but each time Papa went into Gran's room for something, he would come out, muttering: "She does it to spite me."

And this would upset Mum, and Paulina too, because they knew it wasn't done out of spite at all; but Dad didn't appear to notice they were upset.

Paulina thought about how often grown-ups on the telly would spend hours discussing "successful marriages and unsuccessful marriages, successful-unsuccessful", over and over again. These programmes were awfully boring! "Successful-unsuccessful", the word itself, somehow had a nasty ring to it.

Her parents' marriage, at any rate, was successful. For this was what Gran told Mrs. Wanda Bamburskaya, the nextdoor neighbour, when the latter came to visit her and the two of them would sit knitting, chatting away to each other for hours on end. But what exactly did "a successful" marriage mean? Paulina wished someone would explain this to her. Successful!

Take today, for instance. Even before they had got up, Papa had gone for Gran over the porridge, Mama, sticking up for Gran, had snapped Papa's head off, while Gran had stood there, without saying a word, her lips twitching. Whenever Gran went dead silent like this, it meant she was thinking of the past. Of Grandad, and of the small town of Steephill, where they'd lived and where Mum had grown up and where Grandad had died several years ago, "from his heart", as Gran used to say.

"Successful," Paulina muttered to herself.

Gran's journey down memory lane and Paulina's thoughts were interrupted by Papa, who said:

"I've got a meeting at ten sharp, incidentally." Then to Mama: "Vera, are you ready?" Then to Gran: "Taisya, will you ever be finished with those plaits? My meeting

isn't at twelve, or at half past five, or the day after tomorrow, but today, at ten sharp!"

Tying the ribbons in crooked bows on the plaits, Gran gave it up as a bad job and released Paulina, Mama grabbed hold of her bag of manuscripts, and all three of them dashed out onto the landing. Mama pressed the button for the lift, but Papa, not waiting for it to creep up to the seventh floor, ran down the stairs. And by the time Paulina and her Mama got outside, the red Zhiguli was already waiting for them, its engine purring, with the doors to the front and back seats wide open. No one noticed Gran who had come out on the balcony and was waving goodbye.

What a nasty morning! Why were the mornings so often like this at home? Before Paulina had had time to think about it all, Papa had already come to a stop in front of her kindergarten, Mama had hurriedly kissed her goodbye, turning round from the front seat, and Paulina had run up the path to join her group which was the senior group, while their Zhiguli was already speeding along the road to the publishers' office, where Mama worked as an editor. Papa would probably be in time for his meeting, because his ministry was only a stone's throw away from Mama's publishers.

So why had the morning been such a nasty, grumpy one?

"Good morning, Paulina!" Miss Anna, the kindergarten teacher, called to her. "Why are you frowning?"

But before Paulina had had time to tell her why, she clapped her hands together and cried:

"Line up now, children! Today, we are going to the park."

March! March! A beautiful, sunny, March morning! At the top of a maple-tree, two magpies were chattering away making a terrible noise. Paulina listened. Was it the rooks they were arguing about, perhaps? Yes, or no? She wasn't sure. Ah, there were some rooks. Two of them, jet-black. They had twigs in their beaks which they were carrying over to a birch tree, laying them down on the highest branches. Were they making a nest, perhaps? Gran had told Paulina that nowadays the rooks no longer flew away from the big towns in winter. This was because the weather had got warmer and there was plenty of food waste now to feed on. Gran had an amusing way of putting it:

"Just fancy, Paulina, the rooks are becoming quite Russian in their habits."

Of course, when they had flown off to foreign lands, they had stopped being Russians, becoming, for instance, Indian rooks instead. Where did they use to fly to before? To Africa? To India? She must ask Papa.

Thinking of Papa reminded Paulina of the morning and of how, recently, Papa was always busy and never had time for her, and she began frowning again.

The children were standing round the bench where Miss Anna sat reading a book to them: it was probably the story about the donkey or the little goat. Paulina

walked off and hid behind a big maple tree. She was now going to play her favourite game, whenever she played it, it always made her feel nice and cheerful. The thing is that Paulina had a dog. The dog which she had been asking for for ages and which she had set her heart on. He was a really lively, clever, kind dog and his name was Tom. Yes, this was the dog that she had asked her parents to buy her for her birthday and had been given a carpet to go in her room instead. And before that, they had bought a carpet for the big room. Why it had to be either a carpet or a dog, was a mystery to her. The dog wouldn't mind the carpet at all. On the contrary, he'd be able to sleep on it. It would be nicer to play with Paulina on, too, instead of on the cold floor. Alright! Let them do as they like! And anyway, Paulina had a dog, Tom. It didn't matter at all that Tom was only a make-believe dog, that she had invented him. He was real for all that.

"Tom, come here!" Paulina called.

Tom immediately came running up to his mistress. He had a black, smooth coat, sticking up ears and a hairy face. Paulina stroked his warm back.

"Let's go for a walk, you silly-billy!"

Tom wagged his short stump of a tail. Paulina put on his collar and lead. They walked up and down the paths. Tom ran ahead, often looking back at Paulina who was talking to him.

"You see, Tom," she said, "I don't understand what they mean when they talk about a 'successful marriage'.

Mama no sooner comes home from work than she starts reading some papers, which are called manuscripts. Yesterday I asked her to read me a book and she said she couldn't until she had finished reading her manuscript on modal verbs. What do you make of that, Tom? I know what noddle means. It's when you get sleepy reading manuscripts. But what about modal? I don't think there is such a thing. 'Stop pestering me, I haven't got time to play with you, I've got to get through these "modal verbs".' Papa hasn't got time to play with me, either. No one has, Tom."

Though Tom was sorry for Paulina, he didn't forget to lift his leg, now and then, on the trunk of a maple or lime tree.

"Granny Taya is very nice," Paulina went on. "Only you know, Tom, she feels sad all the time. She keeps remembering Grandad and their life together in Steephill. She told me a story about roses. Shall I tell it to you? Listen. Long, long ago, at the time known as 'straightafterthewar', there was an Armenian called Vardkez, living in Steephill. How do I know? Gran told me, of course. What a silly dog you are, Tom, how else could I have known? He lived there and he grew roses. Beautiful roses: red ones and white ones. Sometimes he'd sell them, Gran said they were very cheap, and sometimes he'd just give them away, because he wasn't a bit greedy. And Gran told me how Grandad would bring her bunches of Vardkez's roses. He had to go a long, long way, to get them, to the edge of the town, because Vardkez

lived right on the outskirts, at a place called 'Goats' Marsh'. Whether this was because goats lived there and croaked like frogs, or whether it was just chance that the street where Vardkez lived was called this, I couldn't tell you. And Gran always says:

"'It was the best present there could possibly be, Paulina. Better than a carpet, a cut-glass dish, or even expensive wallpaper.'

"'Better than a colour telly, too?' I asked her once. And she burst out laughing.

"'There was no such thing as the telly, in those days,' she said, 'neither colour nor black-and-white. Grandad would give me a bunch of Vardkez's roses and we'd be as happy as sandpipers, the three of us: me, him and your mother too. We had such happy mornings, in those days!' What do you make of that, Tom?"

Tom listened carefully, leaning his head first on one side, then on the other. He understood everything.

"I asked Mum once: 'Do you remember Vardkez's roses?'" Paulina went on. "At first, Mum said: 'What is it now, Paulina? I'm busy! Can't you see I'm working?' Then she smiled and said: 'Roses! Of course, I remember! Your grandad, my dad that is, would give them to my mum, your gran. Scarlet and white roses. And for some reason, they'd put us all in a good mood. We used to have such happy mornings in those days!'"

Tom pulled at the lead. Paulina walked along, skipping, behind him. What fun it was to have a dog of one's own!

"Pauli-n-a-a!" she heard someone calling her. It was Miss Anna. "Paulin-a-a! It's time to go! Line up, please!"

Whereupon what always happened, when someone called her in a loud, bossy voice, now took place: Tom gave a really hard tug at the lead, and Paulina was forced to let go of it. Tom rushed away as fast as his legs would carry him, the loop on the end of the lead jerking along the ground, sending up sprays of water from the puddles of melted snow.

"Tom, Tom, come here!" Paulina called.

But it didn't do any good, and she knew it wouldn't. Her dog, her own, beloved, make-believe dog, always ran away, disappearing into the distance, as soon as a third person appeared on the scene.

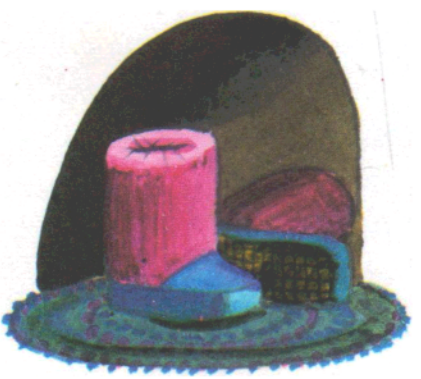
Paulina went to get in line. The day which had started badly, was still going wrong, because she hadn't managed to spend any time at all with Tom. But later on it became even worse. After rest, she didn't want to get up. Miss Anna was rather cross at first, then she became worried and went to get a thermometer. Having taken Paulina's temperature she let her stay in bed, telling her to drink a glass of warm milk. Though Paulina didn't feel like it, she did as she was told.

Papa was detained at the ministry, so it was Mama who came to fetch her from the kindergarten, she was carrying two heavy bags: one had food in it, the other, the manuscript on modal verbs. Mama was very worried, she dressed Paulina herself, and leaving her with the

bags, she went outside and caught a taxi. On the way home in the taxi, she kept on feeling Paulina's forehead, saying:

"What's wrong with you, sweetie?"

Paulina's head ached and she had a sore throat. Her eyes were sore too. The bad day ended on an even worse note. Paulina had fallen ill.



Chapter 2. DOCTOR DOROKHOV AND THE LITTLE GIRL-STAR

Who, for pity's sake, enjoys being ill? No one in the whole world, or so one might think. But Paulina... No, that is not true. Paulina didn't like being ill either. And, indeed, who on earth could possibly enjoy having a temperature, being dosed with different sorts of medicine and being made to lie in bed — in woollen socks what is more. What could possibly be nastier than having to wear woollen socks in bed?!

But, the thing is, that whenever Paulina fell ill Mama or Gran would ring the children's hospital and then Doctor Dorokhov would come round. And that was nice! In fact, it was very nice, indeed! Just why she enjoyed the doctor's visits so much, Paulina wouldn't have been able to explain straight away.

Doctor Dorokhov's christian name was Alexei. He was so young that everyone felt like calling him Alyosha. But it would have been bad manners to address a doctor in a white uniform, with a stethoscope round his neck, as just plain Alyosha. And so, in order to avoid a slip of the tongue, Papa and Mama and Gran and Paulina always referred to him between themselves as Doctor Dorokhov.

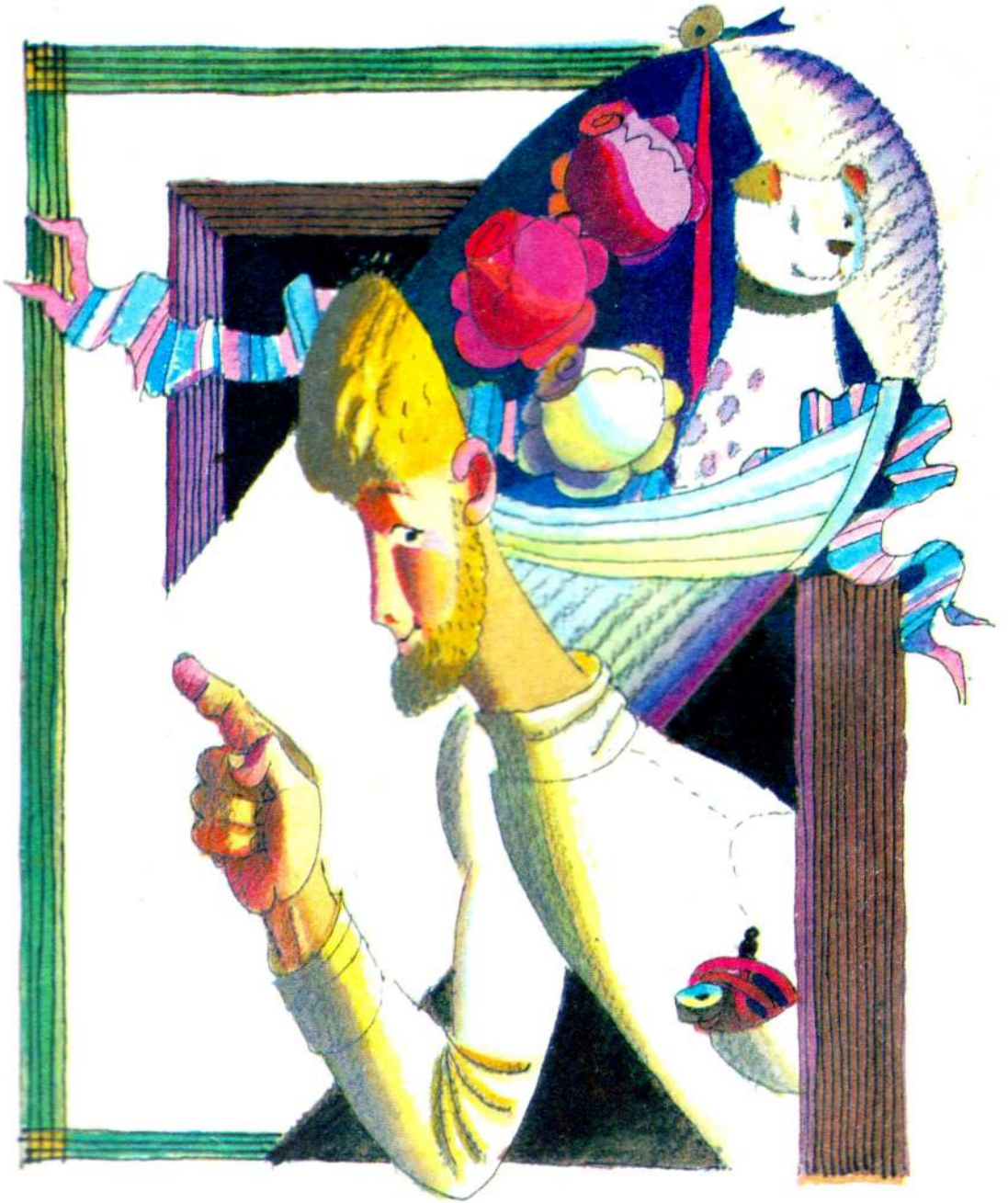
Doctor Dorokhov was very, very tall and he had a special way of looking at you—it was a thoughtful, kind and understanding look all in one. Paulina felt she would be able to tell Dr. Dorokhov about Tom. Only him, not any of the other grown-ups.

During the day the bell rang and, within a few minutes he, that is to say Doctor Dorokhov, had appeared in Paulina's room. He walked towards her, wiping his hands on a soft towel which he handed back to Gran.

Gran moved up a chair for him and he sat down beside Paulina's bed.

"Well, Freckles, who's been wading through the puddles, then?" Doctor Dorokhov asked.

It was quite true that, as soon as spring started, both sides of Paulina's nose would come out in an impudent rash of freckles. No one ever called her "Freckles", of



course. She wouldn't have allowed them to. Doctor Dorokhov could though: the way he said it didn't sound in the least bit insulting, on the contrary, it was rather nice.

As always, he listened through his stethoscope "take a big breath when I tell you to", and then, as if not trusting the stethoscope, he laid his ear on Paulina's back, telling her again to take a big breath.

"Nothing much, you've just caught a cold," he said to Paulina, taking both her hands in his and giving her a searching look. "What's worrying you, Freckles?" he asked in a low voice. "You in a bad mood?"

Paulina looked Doctor Dorokhov straight in the eye and nodded. She couldn't help nodding. He understood. He didn't ask anything else. But, before he left, he smiled and said:

"Never mind, you'll soon get better, Freckles!"

And so quietly that you could only just hear it—or was it Paulina's imagination?—he sang almost in a whisper:

Little Dog sets sail tomorrow,
Swift's its boat. It's called "A-Hoy".
Grief is never everlasting,
*Little Dog will bring you joy**.

And winking, which he normally never did, Dr. Dorokhov quickly went out into the corridor. Paulina was very surprised but when, having seen the doctor to the

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* Translated by L. Kirzhner.— *Ed.*

door, Gran came back into her room, Paulina didn't say a word to her about all this, she just asked:

"Gran, tell me about Steephill."

"What's there to tell, Paulina? It's all been and gone." Gran sighed.

"But, surely, the town is still there?" Paulina asked in a surprised voice. "You went there, remember? And brought back picture postcards with different views of the town on them!"

"There's a town there, true. But it has changed. It's modern. It's got much bigger. Nothing but tall buildings. Stone. Lots of people living in them. All strangers."

Gran fell silent, she was thinking.

"Gran," Paulina pressed her, "tell me about the other Steephill. The one that used to be."

Paulina was leading her grandmother on. She knew that her Granny loved the other Steephill where she had grown up and where her daughter had grown up too and where Grandad used to live.

"Steephill was a very small town," she would say, "but for me it was home!"

"Go on Gran, please."

"Paulina, I've still got to get supper. Mum will come home tired from work, Dad will come home as hungry as a horse and there'll be nothing to eat. I've started making mushroom soup."

"Where did you get the mushrooms from? There aren't any yet! The snow hasn't melted!"

"Have you forgotten Uncle Jonas, Grandad's friend, who came to visit us from Lithuania? He brought us a whole sackful of dried mushrooms. I'm making the ones that are left over into soup."

"Let it boil a bit longer, Gran. While you sit and talk to me. I'm ill. Doctor Dorokhov said so!"

"You'd get round anyone," Gran said with a smile. "Just let me go and turn the gas down then, it won't do it any harm to have a good simmer."

But as soon as Gran had left the room and right until she got back, Paulina heard the following words quite plainly, though there was absolutely no one there at all to pronounce them:

Little Dog sets sail tomorrow,
Swift's its boat. It's called "A-Hoy".
Grief is never everlasting,
Little Dog will bring you joy.

Or was it her imagination, again?

"Well," said Gran sitting herself down beside Paulina's bed. "Listen. The station at Steephill used to be quite small before, but it was very pretty. As pretty as a picture. It was all yellow, while the border under the roof and the lintels were snow-white, they used to get a new coat of whitewash each spring."

"Where did you live?" Paulina interrupted her. Although she had heard all about the pretty station and about where her Gran used to live dozens of times before.

"Where did we live? We lived on a very steep hill, right up at the top. It wasn't for nothing that the town was called Steephill. First one had to climb up the hill, then cross a garden where the lime trees used to grow, our lane started beyond the garden. It was called Palm Lane. No one could make out where it got its name from. When I was at school, I even went to the local history museum to try and find out. And there they told me that someone by the name of Palmin, or it might have been Palmov, had once lived in our lane. But who he was and why the lane was named after him remains a mystery to this day. So there we are. And when your grandad came back from the war..."

"Was he a war-hero?" Paulina always asked this question.

"Oh, no. There was no time for that, dear. He was too young. Soon after he received permission to go to the front as a volunteer, the war came to an end. Hero or no hero, your grandad was no coward. He was a really good man, your grandad was..."

Paulina waited expectantly, for she knew what was coming next: Gran's nicest story about Vardkez and his beautiful red and white roses.

But at this point the telephone went. Gran's friend, Mrs. Wanda Bamburskaya, kept her chatting for ages on the phone, and right after that Papa and Mama came home and Gran gave them supper. After supper, Mama came in to see Paulina for a minute or two; she patted her on the head and gave her some medicine, then she

went back to her manuscripts and, once again, no one had any time for Paulina. Though her temperature had dropped, Paulina felt weak and sleepy. She could hear someone muttering the following words over and over again:

Grief is never everlasting,
Little Dog will bring you joy.

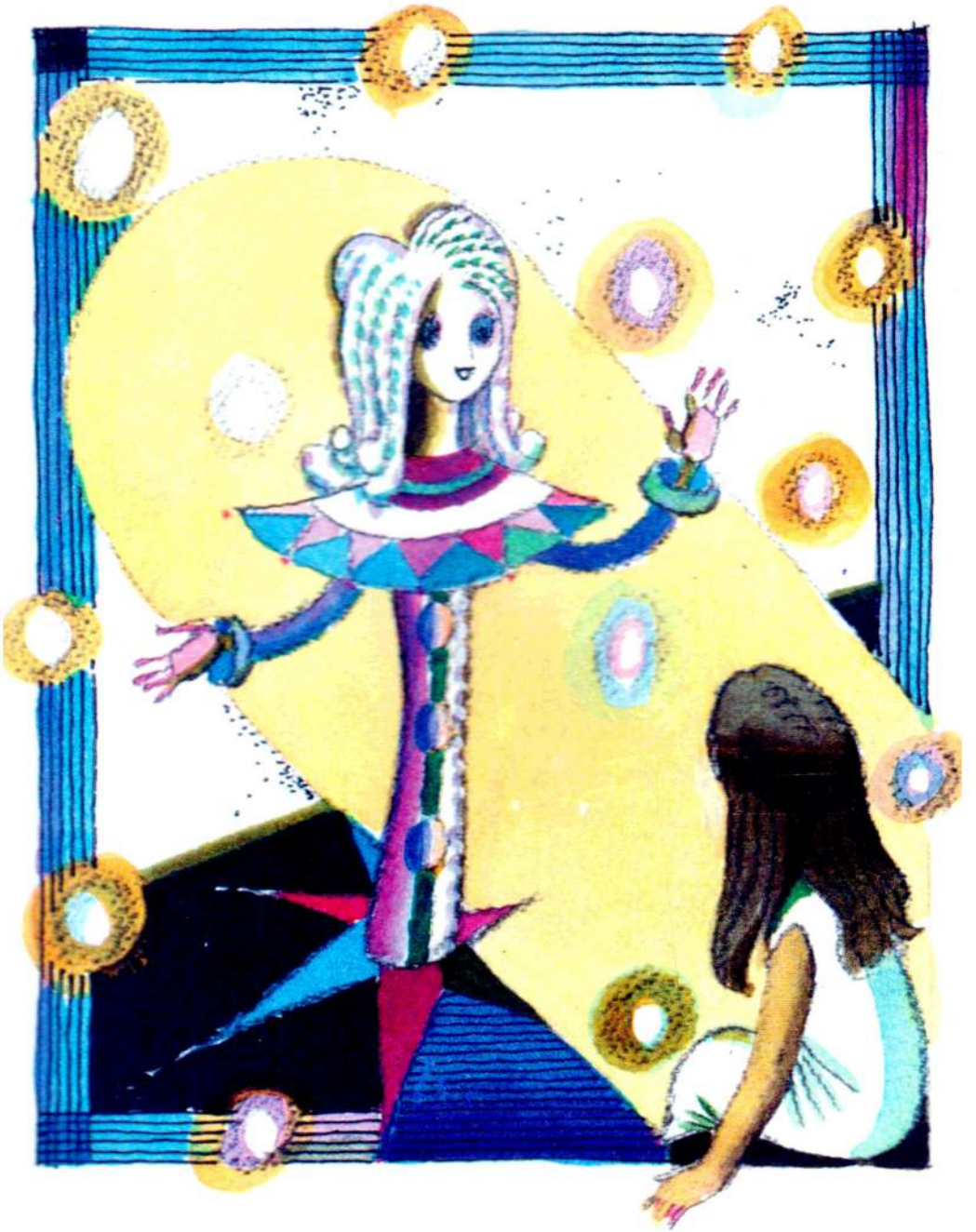
Paulina was too weak even to try and think who it might be. Gran came in and turned out the light and Paulina dozed off...

When she'd finished doing the dishes in the kitchen, Gran went to her room where the big photograph of Grandad was and the vases of dried grass stalks. For some time the corridor light showed through the crack under Paulina's door, then eventually it went out too.

Paulina wasn't really asleep, she was just dozing. Through the wall, someone in the flat nextdoor, was playing the same tune, over and over again, on the violin.

No one opened her door. She was quite certain of that. The window was also shut because Paulina had a cold and Gran was trying to keep the warmth in. But suddenly...

Goodness knows where from, a little girl appeared in the middle of the floor. And the room became as light as it was in the daytime not because the lamp had been turned on, but because the little girl was shining. And her dress was bright and gleaming too. Paulina sat up in bed.



"Am I dreaming about you?" she asked the little girl.

"But you aren't asleep!" her mysterious visitor answered, and when she spoke light-green sparks were sent racing over the walls.

"Who are you?" Paulina asked in a whisper. She was terrified. It was the first time she'd ever seen a little girl who shone like a light and who spoke in coloured words.

"Don't be frightened," said the little girl. And again blobs of light, only not green this time, but blue, went chasing over the walls. "There's no need to be afraid. I'm a star."

"What do you mean, a star? That's not possible."

The little girl laughed, giving off even more sparks. This time they were all colours of the rainbow.

"Surely you must have seen the stars in the sky? Some are big and some are quite small..."

"But you aren't in the sky, though!"

"Stars have rays which join the sky to the earth," said the little girl.

"Do you have a name?" asked Paulina, she was really puzzled now.

"Aya. I'm a little girl-star and I'm called Aya."

"How did you get into my room?"

Aya laughed again with her rainbow-coloured laughter.

"That's quite easy. It would be more to the point to ask me why I'm here."

"Why?" Paulina asked, almost without realizing that she was doing so.

"You're in a bad way, aren't you?" said Aya.

"It's nothing, really. I haven't got a temperature anymore."

"That wasn't what I meant. Think again."

Paulina did as she was told. There was certainly no point in trying to hide anything from this brilliantly shining little girl whose laughter was all colours of the rainbow! Though, in general, Paulina was a fairly secretive person and wasn't in the habit of telling people what she was thinking deep down inside.

"She's all buttoned-up," her Gran used to say of her.

"You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to," Aya went on. "We stars know much more about you people, than you realize. For instance, I know about Tom, and about the carpet and about the modal verbs."

"How can you?" Paulina asked timidly. "You say you're a star, though you aren't in the sky. And yet you look ... well, exactly like a little girl. Only your dress is... It is as if you're in fancy dress—in a snow queen costume."

"Sometimes, we stars are able to look like human beings."

The little girl-star fell silent.

"Listen," she said eventually. "You love your Mama and Papa." She wasn't asking a question, she was just stating a fact.

Paulina thought for a bit, it was as if she was looking inside herself. Mama had lovely, warm hands and it was so nice when she had the time to talk to Paulina. And Papa could be very kind too, when he wanted to. He'd sing to her:

Paulinette, Paulinotte,
Can you hear me, or not?
Yes, I do, and so what?

It was part of some French song or other. And after he had sung it, both of them, Papa and Paulina, would burst into peals of laughter.

"Of course, I love them," Paulina said at last. "And Gran too..."

"I know. Only after you got your new flat and were so thrilled with it, you all became very gloomy for some reason. Preoccupied. And there were no more happy mornings in your home. And life without a good start in the morning just isn't worth living."

Paulina nodded in agreement.

"You see," Aya went on. "Mopites have invaded your house. As soon as you all began to feel gloomy, they went for you."

"Mopites?" Paulina asked in astonishment. "Who are they? Animals or insects?"

"Neither one nor the other."

"What are they then?"

"They are tiny little creatures like specks of dust. Only specks of dust sparkle and these are as gloomy as can be."

"Are they frightening?"

"Not so much frightening, as harmful. They like people to be miserable. They weave gloom out of invisible thread and, like spiders, catch carefree words, smiles

Mopites

and all happy sounds in their webs. Having caught them, they carry them off and hide them in caves, which are too far away to be visited by either human beings, or stars for that matter. And they love playing mean tricks on people."

"What can we do?" asked Paulina.

"Get dressed quietly and we'll be off."

"Where to? I can't, I'm ill," Paulina said in a scared voice. "I'm not allowed outside. Doctor Dorokhov said I had to stay indoors."

"You are very nearly better, you haven't a temperature," said Aya. "You'll see, our walk won't do you any harm."

"But what about Papa and Mama? And Gran? They will wonder where I am."

"It's up to you, Paulina," Aya said. "A lot depends on you."

Paulina thought for no longer than a minute. Then she quickly got dressed. She looked round her room. Ah, yes! She'd done pictures for Gran and Mama's birthday. Gran and Mama had been born on the same day: the twenty-third of March. She wanted the pictures to be a surprise. One was of palm-trees with clusters of yellow bananas growing on them; right on the top of the highest palm-tree was a blue monkey. Why blue? Because her brown chalk had broken. And it seemed to Paulina that a blue monkey was even better—it was funnier. The other picture was of grazing horses. Handsome, different-coloured horses on the edge of a forest.

There was a sun shining in the sky and large clouds, looking like birds, floating in it. Paulina took the third volume of the Children's Encyclopaedia down off the shelf and, hiding the pictures between its pages, put it back in its place.

"Let's go," she said to Aya.

As they tiptoed to the door, Aya whispered:

You and I'll tiptoe quietly
Into time well out of mind
And a bunch of scarlet roses
In the far-off days we'll find.

A silver light pours from the sky,
*Don't be scared, don't take fright.**

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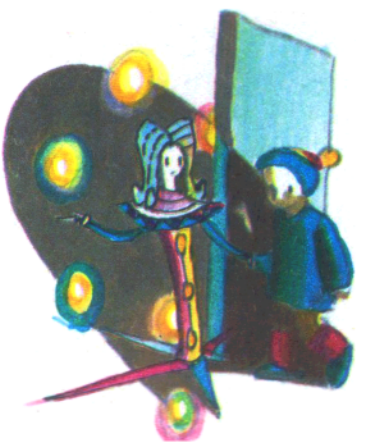
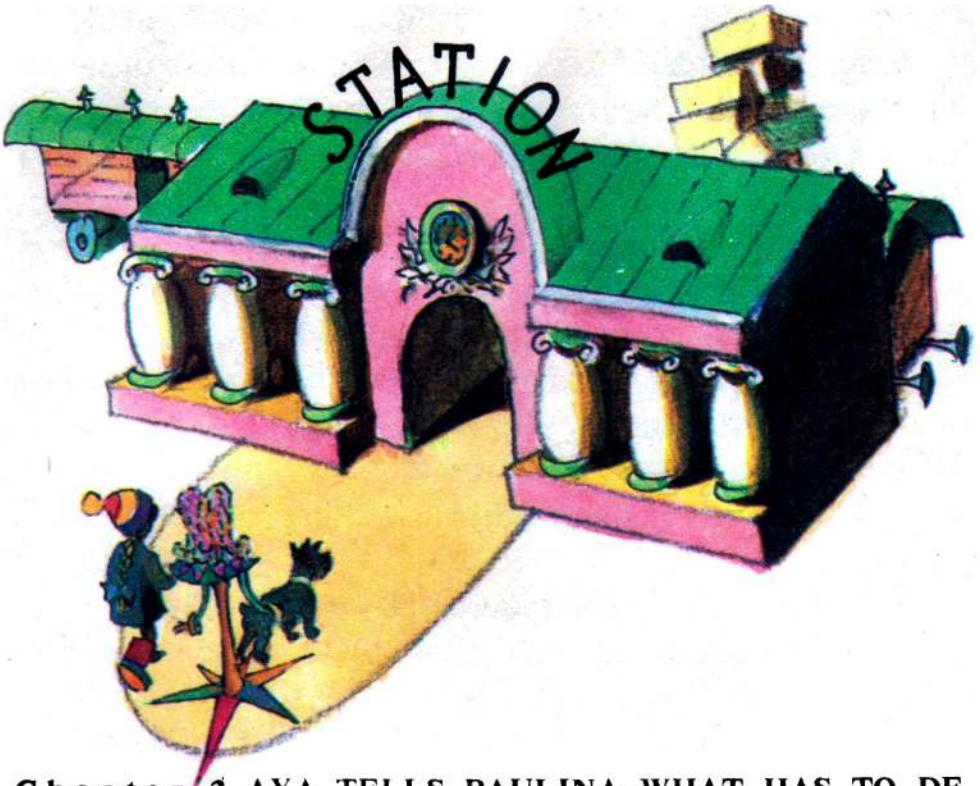
* Translated by L. Kirzhner.— *Ed.*





Chapter 3. AYA TELLS PAULINA WHAT HAS TO DE DONE. THE STRANGE TRAIN ON THE FRONTIER TO WINDY DESERT.

The lift wasn't working. The staircase lights were burning very dimly because it was night-time. But that particular night, this didn't matter at all because Aya, the little girl-star, Paulina's new friend, was shining so brightly that it was as light as a summer's day.

Going down the stairs Aya spoke in a low voice. Her words also gave off a light, though not a very strong one: first one and then another pale lilac-coloured sparks danced over the staircase walls.

"What we have to do is this," Aya said to Paulina. "Somehow, we have to bring back the happy morning to your house. Then everything will be alright again."

"But how? That's impossible," Paulina sighed.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because Mama will never stop bringing her verbs home."

"That can't be right," said Aya. "The thing is she is doing extra work, that's why she brings them home. You'll see, it will stop eventually."

"It won't ever! They want to buy a colour television!" Paulina exclaimed.

"That won't help," Aya remarked.

"What do you mean, it won't help?" Paulina was surprised. "Won't help what?"

"It won't help get rid of the mopites. A colour telly is a good thing, but it is no cure for mopites. And then one shouldn't think about it so much. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes I do," Paulina said. "And then the mopites would go?"

"There wouldn't be so many of them, at any rate," Aya answered in a thoughtful voice.

"How can one get rid of them altogether?" Paulina asked, looking hopefully into Aya's shining, blue eyes.

"We must bring at least one happy morning back."

"But Aya, how can you and I possibly do that? And at night-time too? Aya, I'm frightened!"

Aya stopped. They'd reached the landing between the second and first floors.

"Listen, Paulina," she said in a slow, solemn voice. "And please promise you won't be frightened."

"I promise," Paulina said in a whisper.

"You and I and someone else—and you'll see who that is in a minute—have got to bring the happy mornings back to your home. And, in order to do that, we have to find VARDKEZ'S RED AND WHITE ROSES!"

"But he lived ages ago! Gran said it was in the 'straightafterthewar'. He wasn't young even then. He's probably dead."

"What do you mean, dead? You are absolutely wrong there," Aya replied.

"I'm not, I'm not. I think I even remember Gran saying Vardkez had died."

"He may be dead today," Aya remarked. "But he was alive then."

"Straightafterthewar?"

"Of course. He was then. And I was too. That should help us, somehow."

"Aya," Paulina said. "Perhaps you could do this alone..."

"Forget it, Paulina," Aya interrupted her. "It won't work without you. No one will talk to me. People are afraid sometimes when they see a star in front of them! And then... No one in the whole world can do this except you. You have to do it for your family. For your Papa, your Mama, and for your Gran."

Having reached the ground floor, and not letting the front door bang behind them, they went out into the yard. But it wasn't a bit like the yard Paulina knew. Paulina's yard had builder's rubbish piled up in it and limp lime trees which had been planted in the autumn along the pavement. This one, all covered in melting snow, was more like a desert than a yard.

"Now, we'll call someone. Tom!" Aya shouted.

A blue spark shot off into the darkness. And to Paulina's astonishment, who should come bouncing out into the light but Tom, her own dear, beloved, little dog! He was just as he had run off that day in the park—in his collar and lead, the latter soaking wet because of the puddles.

Once Paulina and Tom had got over their joy at seeing each other, Paulina said:

"But, Aya! Only I know about Tom. No one in the kindergarten knows and it is the same at home. He only exists for me, because I play by myself..."

"Would you like Tom to be for real?" Aya asked.

"Yes, I would, very much," Paulina answered.

"That's done, then!"

"Does that mean Tom is real now?" Paulina asked in astonishment.

"Yes."

"But that's a miracle! And miracles don't happen," Paulina added in a doubtful voice, as she stroked Tom.

Once again, as she had done in Paulina's room, Aya burst into rainbow-coloured peals of laughter.

"What do you mean they don't happen? We come across miracles at every step we take! You wait and see."

Paulina remembered how Papa would say to Gran: "Miracles don't happen, Taisya, things don't just turn up in a house of their own accord."

And, it was quite true, of course, they didn't.

Remembering this, confused Paulina. And that Aya, the shining little girl-star talked so wisely, almost like a grown-up, also puzzled her. True, she thought to herself:

"Aya said she was alive in the straightafterthewar. So perhaps she was alive even earlier? She is a star, after all! And stars always shine in the sky! How complicated everything is! And interesting too! Perhaps miracles do happen, after all?"

Bending down, Aya shook the water off the wet lead and said:

"Well, Tom. Seek them out. We've got to find the road to the magic station. Or the train will go and then we'll have to wait ages for the next one."

Tom nudged Paulina's hand with his nose, then he began to sniff hard at the ground, he was looking for the road.

No, Paulina was quite sure now she had never been here before. Tom seemed to have found the road. The melting March snow stopped squelching under Paulina's boots. Her boots, for some reason, weren't wet which

was odd, considering all the slush there was. Aya was walking along beside her, she could have been Lyuba, Paulina's kindergarten friend. Lyuba had a very springy walk. Paulina took another look. No. Aya's walk was even springier, it was almost as if she wasn't touching the ground, though, all the same, she was rather like Lyuba to look at. Just a little. And then... But, no! Of course it wasn't Lyuba! Aya was shining all over and her words were not just sounds, they were full of light and different colours!

Tom hurriedly ran forward, Aya let him off the lead, giving it to Paulina.

The night went on and on. Oddly enough, the time of year began to change, very slowly. At home it had been March. Now, suddenly, there came a whiff of fragrant May soil, then of cherry blossom, then of lilac. But, gradually, these smells began to fade and there was a strong scent of mushrooms. The road led into a wood. The mushroom smell got stronger. The trees in the wood stood absolutely still. Not one branch or leaf moved.

Paulina suddenly noticed to her astonishment that the trees had no branches or leaves on them, at all. They towered above her like weird blocks of stone. Paulina touched one of them, but she immediately snatched her hand away. The tree trunk felt cold and unpleasantly clammy.

"Aya, what is happening? Where are we?" she exclaimed. "What are these funny, nasty trees and

why is there such a strong smell of mushrooms about?"

"They aren't trees at all," Aya said. "You've never seen a wood like this before. It's mushroom wood."

"Mushroom?"

"Yes. Giant mushrooms grow here, they are ever so tall. They are trees and mushrooms all in one."

I must remember to tell Gran about that, Paulina thought to herself. What a surprise she will have!

Tom suddenly rushed off. Paulina was frightened he would run away and disappear, as he usually did. But he came back immediately and started barking.

"Paulina, Paulina!" Aya cried in delight. "We've arrived. There's the station."

A shower of coloured sparks shot off in the direction Tom had just appeared from.

"It's not going to be very easy, though," Aya added, thoughtfully. "I can see a man... What a bore!"

And now Paulina could see the station too. It was rather odd. On the brick building, where the name of the station is usually written, there was just one word, "STATION". A train stood alongside the only platform. It was difficult to tell whether it was a goods train or a passenger train because the carriages were very peculiar. Though it looked quite like the train in which Paulina had travelled south with her mother, it had no

windows. And, even more surprising, there weren't any rails: the train stood on the ground. And at the head of the train, where there should have been a steam, diesel or electric engine attached to the coaches, there was nothing at all.

"Perhaps it is a suburban train," Paulina thought to herself.

In front of each coach, there was a huge pile of boxes, all of the same size. The platform was absolutely deserted. There was one solitary man, looking pretty sullen, walking along beside the train and loading the boxes into the coaches.

"Hello," said Aya.

Turning round abruptly, the man stared at them without a word. Having stayed silent for a fairly long time he eventually said in a grumpy voice:

"What do you want?"

Tom started barking. Aya told him to be quiet. As for Paulina, she didn't know what to say.

Aya started speaking:

"If I'm not mistaken, you are Hobbler?"

"That's as may be. I can see who you are, straight off. It beats me why stars can't stay put in the sky. What do you want?"

"We've got to get to the town of Steephill, in the straightafterthewar."

"We don't take passengers. There are too many boxes as it is, see? Quite apart from stars, little girls and dogs... Too many by half. Why don't you help me load

up? I bust myself loading, then I have to bust myself unloading and one ends up in a terrible muddle, not knowing where one belongs: whether one's a good's truck loader or a driver. Hm, so they thought they'd take a trip to Steephill! Back to the straightafterthewar, just like that, see?"

"Don't get angry," Aya begged him.

"How do you expect me not to?" Hobbler muttered. "We don't take today's passengers there. Those faraway times are over and done with for people in the here and now."

"But I can be there and in the here and now, as you can see for yourself," Aya insisted.

"That's as may be. Think I can't tell the difference between a star and a little girl? It might be possible for the dog, say. Dogs are found in all ages. But what about your friend? She belongs to today, to the here and now. So just you beat it, and no more chat. She goes on and on about stars and dogs while the train stands empty, waiting to be loaded."

At this Aya smiled, and letting out different coloured sparks which floated along the coaches, she said in a cunning voice:

"You look more carefully."

"Look at what? I'm pushed for time."

"The little girl also belongs to those days," Aya went on, still smiling. "Can't you see she's got plaits?"

"What?" Hobbler asked in his previous unfriendly voice.

"She's got plaits. Little girls today have their hair cut short."

"There's something in that," Hobbler muttered. "They like to keep up with the fashions, they do. They go in for stylish haircuts from the age of three onwards."

"Yes, yes," Aya nodded. "That's it. That's exactly what I mean. But this little girl has plaits. The plaits of those days. Can't you see them?"

"Hm-hm-hm," grunted Hobbler. "They're plaits alright."

"And that means she belongs to those days too. To some extent, at least."

"Really?" Hobbler still sounded doubtful.

"So take us with you, please take us with you!"

"You're a star, so you should know this. We have to go across the Windy Desert."

"I know," Aya answered calmly. "The train, in fact, is now standing at the frontier to the Windy Desert."

"The wind won't half give you a buffetting! It will blow you up, blow you down and blow you all over the place!"

"Tell me, have you ever seen the wind blowing a star away? Even one? I'm sure you never have: you've never seen the stars rolling about in the wind, have you?"

Aya was very persuasive.

"Come on, Hobbler, do let's try," she said, keeping on at him.

"It's alright for you, you're a star. But they're people. As for that..." he said, looking at Tom. "Pah! They're a rum lot, that's for sure."

"But I belong to them, and she does too!" Aya said loudly, and again different-coloured sparks shot along the coaches.

"Alright, then. Only we'll have to be quick loading on the boxes."

While Tom ran about whining, Paulina and Aya began to lift the boxes and drag them up a rickety plank into the coaches.

It was really most peculiar! Though the boxes were identical in shape and size, their weights were anything but the same. While some weighed almost nothing, others were too heavy for Aya and Paulina to lift at all and they had to ask gloomy Hobbler to help them.

"What's in these boxes?" asked Paulina.

"Time, Miss. Minutes, hours, days. Those that have already gone by are packed in boxes," Hobbler answered. His voice was less grumpy now.

"Why are some full and others empty?"

"They're empty alright. Only the empty ones are the boxes you can hardly pick up. Because the time that is in them was wasted on chat, idleness and trifles."

"How do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Wasted time is very heavy indeed. One might even say it's unliftable."

"What's in the light boxes, then?"

"The light boxes are filled with really well-spent, useful time. Kind, useful deeds help to make one light-hearted. And so the boxes are as light as a feather! But, it's time we were off!" Hobbler suddenly cried. "Wind! Raise the barrier! Get ready! We're off!"

Aya quickly darted into a coach dragging Paulina and Tom in behind her. Having locked the doors from inside, she held both Paulina and Tom in her arms.

"Hold on," she said. "And let's hope you don't feel giddy!"

Chapter 4. THE ISLAND OF TALKING HORSES. AYA GETS LOST.

Not to feel giddy was easier said than done, for the train tore along, it flew along in fact, as if it wasn't a train at all, but a rocket in which spacemen fly off into the faraway, mysterious sky. There were no windows in the coach and, therefore, it was impossible to see what was happening outside, though one could hear the howling, whistling wind. But this was no ordinary wind. It was more like hundreds, thousands and millions of winds all put together. Tom lowered his stump of a tail and pressed up tight against Paulina. Paulina listened,

horrified, to the howling and whistling noise made by the wind and was unable to say a word.

"Howl! Howl! Howl!" came from outside the coach.

"Aya, aren't you frightened?" asked Paulina.

"It wouldn't be frightening at all," said Aya, "if they hadn't tagged on behind us. There's no telling what they'll get up to."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The mopites. They want to make quite sure the happy mornings don't come back to your house. For if they did, the mopites would have to scram."

"Don't you dare! Leave those padlocks alone!" Aya shouted angrily, and a shower of dark-blue sparks shot off towards the doors of the coach. In the blue light they gave off, Paulina saw at least a dozen hideous, wrinkled, grey little faces.

At that very same moment, the door burst open and a mighty whirlwind tore, howling, into the coach.

"Paulina! Tom!" Aya screamed.

It all happened it the flick of an eyelid. The whirlwind seized Paulina and Tom and, wrapping them in what felt like a thick sheet, it carried them out of the coach. The train, tearing along at a fantastic speed, immediately disappeared out of sight. Before they had even had time to realize they were enveloped in a thick, clammy fog, Paulina and Tom were zooming towards the ground.

Just as unexpectedly as it had descended, the foggy whirlwind melted and Paulina and Tom found them-

selves sitting on some grass in a wood of tall trees whose leaves were rustling as if it was the summer. The dawn was breaking in the sky.

They lay for a long time on the silky grass, unable to get over the shock. Tom was the first one to get to his feet and he began licking Paulina. Shaking her head, Paulina sat up.

"Where are we, Tom?"

Tom gave a low bark and whined.

"You know, Tom, it is probably just a dream," Paulina said, "all the same, though, things like this just don't happen in real life. Where has Aya got to?"

She put out her hand, thinking that Tom would vanish. But he didn't. He was nice and warm.

Tom ran off, first to the right, then to the left. Then he came back again and sat beside Paulina. Paulina got up and, looking round her, she called:

"Aya! Aya! Aya!"

No one answered.

The only sound was the rustling of the leaves on the trees and bushes.

"Why are there leaves?" Paulina suddenly wondered. "It's still only March. Or have we ended up in a completely different time of year?"

"If we aren't in a dream, Tom, we've had it," Paulina said and Tom listened to her silently, looking very woebegone. "We've had it and, even worse, the happy mornings will never come back to our house now! How can they?! When Papa and Mama and Gran wake up,

they'll find that I'm not there and panic will break out. It will be awful and the morning will be comlpetely spoilt, Tom."

The tears were beginning to well up in each of Paulina's eyes and were just about to pour down her cheeks, when suddenly the bushes were cautiously pushed aside and a horse appeared before them. A beautiful, white stallion with a long, silky mane. Going up to Paulina, he gave her a low bow. And suddenly, he started talking as if he was a human being.

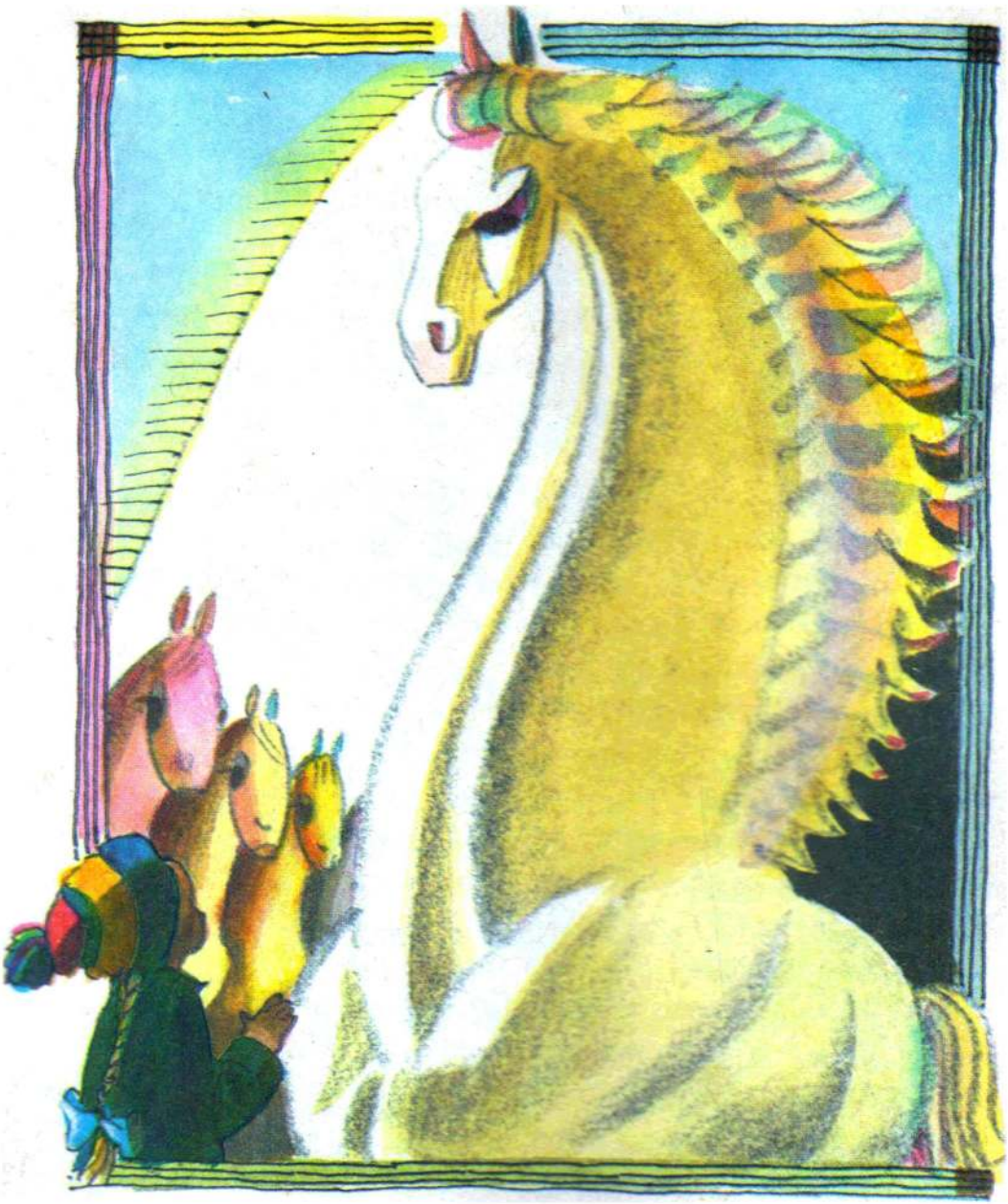
"I welcome you to the evergreen Island of Talking Horses, beautiful Mistress."

"But I'm not your mistress," Paulina said timidly. "I'm a little girl. My name is Paulina. And this is Tom. I promise you I'm no one's mistress, except perhaps his," she said pointing at Tom.

"Don't say that," said White Stallion in a solemn voice. "Come out, all of you!" he called, turning towards bushes. "Quickly. Our Mistress has come at long last."

And, suddenly, horse after horse started to appear from out of the bushes. Soon a great many of them had gathered together. And the first thing each horse did was to come up to Paulina and bow to her. The little girl wasn't frightened because the horses were beautifully behaved. She soon became quite used to the fact that they could talk like human beings.

When it seemed that all the horses from all over the island had gathered together, they surrounded Paulina



in a circle and, slowly and silently, as if at someone's command, gave her three low bows.

"I can't make out why you're bowing to me," Paulina said. "I'm an ordinary little girl. I'm in the senior group at my kindergarten and I'm going to school soon. I've got to get some red and white roses from Vardkez. You don't know where Aya is, I suppose? Aya is a little girl-star."

White Stallion who had first greeted Paulina was, evidently, the senior horse, because it was he who was the first to reply:

"Dear Mistress, you use a lot of words we don't understand. We don't know what 'the senior group at my kindergarten' means, and we don't know Vardkez and no star has ever visited our island. You've landed on the evergreen Island of Talking Horses which is situated in the middle of the Windy Desert."

"But surely islands are only found in the middle of the sea or rivers?" Paulina asked in a surprised voice.

"Quite right," White Stallion replied. "Ours is the only island to be placed in the middle of Winds and not Water. And now, please listen to me, I've one or two things to explain to you."

All the horses nodded their heads in agreement:

"Tell her, tell her."

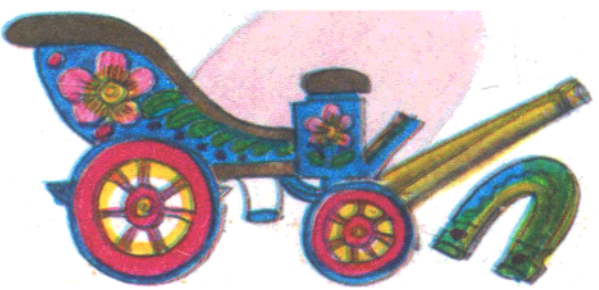
"Long, long ago," White Stallion went on, "there was a man who kept horses. He made money out of them and he didn't love them at all. And horses get very miserable if they aren't loved."

"Very, very miserable," the rest of the horses who were standing round Paulina, nodded their heads again.

"And so the horses, they were our ancestors in fact, left the man and wandered for a long time round the world before they eventually settled on this evergreen island. It's a beautiful island. It's always warm here and it's always summer. But our ancestors soon realized that, however beautiful a place may be, it isn't suitable for horses unless there is Man there. There must be someone to say a kind word to them and pat them on the neck, someone to harness them to a cart, and to ride on them. A horse hates being idle. It loves to work. And once the day's work is done, it loves to graze in the meadows at night. And it likes human company. It likes the light of a campfire, and for men to sit round it, chatting far into the night. In a word, a horse needs a master. And so our ancestors began to wonder what they should do about their predicament. They consulted the winds and the sun, the moon and the rain. And all the advice they were given, they wrote down on a parchment scroll. But, over the centuries, the scroll got covered with dust and was lost. We don't know where it is to this day. All we do know is that our ancestors told us that, in due course, our master would come flying to us out of the sky. And then everything would come right. He'd plough and sow corn, he'd ride us and harness us to carts. And now, today, you've arrived. And we welcome you with all our hearts and bow down to you. You will stay with us forever."

"I'd be very happy to," said Paulina, "but I don't know how to be your mistress, and I can't plough or sow corn, or harness a horse to a cart. There are very few things, in fact, I can do. Can you tell me, please, how I can find the town of Steephill? Aya has disappeared and, as for me, I don't know what to do."

Paulina was close to tears. And, indeed, this was only natural, considering the extraordinary and hopeless position she was in. In order to try and keep her tears back, Paulina looked upwards. Although it was already morning, one tiny star was still shining in the sky.



Chapter 5. PAULINA IS IN DESPAIR. CHUR, THE CLOUD-BIRD.

"Don't you worry about that," said White Stallion. "No colt remains a colt forever. They all grow up sooner or later."

"Yes, that's quite true," nodded the rest of the horses in agreement.

"And you will grow up too and become our Mistress. You'll soon learn what to do. You belong here. We need you."

Paulina didn't say a word.

And at this something totally unexpected happened. The horses came right up close to Paulina. And before she knew where she was she found herself on the back

of a piebald horse and all the horses, led by White Stallion, set off at a gallop carrying Paulina to the other end of the island. Tom rushed after them barking and whining but, unable to keep up with the horses, he gradually fell behind and disappeared from view.

Having arrived at a small glade, deep in the forest, the horses let Paulina down on the ground. Burying her nose in the grass, Paulina burst into tears, giving way to despair. Mama was a long way away. Papa was a long way away and so was Gran. No one knew where Aya was and Tom had got lost. And here she was, small and defenceless, surrounded by horses who wanted her to become their mistress, to groom them and ride them and something else too which Paulina had forgotten the name of. Who made carts? And bridles? She remembered from some book that horses had bridles. And what else? Reins too, it seemed. But more than this, she didn't know.

She cried and cried and cried. The horses stood absolutely silent, they were evidently disappointed. They were so longing for the day when Man would appear on their island and put an end to their idleness which, for horses, is worse than anything. Because a horse is a clever, kind animal and loves working. They had hoped that the little girl would grow up and build herself a house. Horses, after all, are domestic animals. They like living round houses. But, obviously, something had gone wrong. This wasn't what their ancestors had predicted. They had said Man would fly to the island. And he had. Or

rather a little girl had. But little girls were human beings too. But it appeared that all she could do was to sob her head off, and nothing else. The horses felt sorry for her.

"We made a mistake, we thought you were our mistress. Please forgive us," said White Stallion. "Only I don't know what we can do about it now."

Paulina stopped crying and looked at the horses. A lot of big, horses' eyes were staring at her in sympathy.

"I know what has to be done," Paulina said through her tears. "Only I don't know how to go about it. We have to find Tom and we have to find our way to Steephill. In the time that is known as straightafterthewar. We must find Aya too."

Paulina gulped.

"Don't cry," said White Stallion, trying to comfort her. "We are going to ask the advice of our friends, the breezes."

Paulina began to feel more hopeful.

The horses stood absolutely still. They were listening. A rustle could be heard in the trees and bushes. It grew louder until there was no branch, or bush, or even a single leaf or blade of grass that wasn't swaying or whispering. The breeze ruffled Paulina's plaits. Then, suddenly, everything became dead quiet.

White Stallion said sadly:

"The breezes said they can't help. They are too weak. They are no match for the Winds of the Windy Desert."

"But surely something can be done?" Paulina begged, not giving up hope.

White Stallion shook his handsome mane.

"I'm very sorry, there is absolutely nothing we can do. Unless..."

"Excuse me for interrupting," one of the horses put in suddenly. "But the hour of Song has struck. And, according to the bidding of our ancestors, we have to sing at this hour in order not to lose hope. I trust you'll forgive me for reminding you."

"I'm most grateful," said White Stallion. "You were quite right to do so."

And White Stallion hit the ground with his front right hoof.

This was the sign to start singing. And all the horses sang in chorus, their heads thrown back a little, as if they were gazing at the sky:

Ages go, canter days,
The time flies by so fast.
Our Rider, Our Master—
Will he come to us at last?

Then there came a chorus:

Blow, ye winds,
Oh, blow!
Blow ye high and low!
While there's Life,
Heigh-ho!

The Horses' Song

There is, of course,
Hope.

Never lose heart,
Heigh-ho!
Hope against hope.

One day Our Rider will appear.
Yes, he'll come one day, we know.
While there's Life,
There's always Hope.
Blow, ye winds,
Go high and low!

The horses stayed quiet for a second and then again repeated the chorus with great verve:

Never lose heart,
Heigh-ho!
Hope against hope! *

Having sung their song, the horses stood for a while in silence, gazing up at the sky, then they slowly walked off in different directions, disappearing behind the trees.

Only White Stallion remained with Paulina.

"I'm really sad it all turned out like this," he said.

"And so am I," Paulina remarked in a low voice. Following the horses' example, she too gazed up at the

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Translated by L. Kirzhner. — *Ed.*

sky. Though it wasn't a very hot day, the sun was shining. It had already climbed quite high. White, fluffy little clouds floated past it and the sun's beaming face would go behind them for a few seconds, and then reemerge again.

"As I was saying," said White Stallion, "there is one, last hope for you."

"Really?" Paulina couldn't believe her ears.

"I was on the point of telling you about it when the hour of Song struck. Unfortunately, it is only a very faint hope."

"Well, at least it's something," Paulina answered, almost in a whisper.

"Do you see the clouds in the sky?" asked White Stallion.

"Yes, they are very pretty."

"Perhaps. But they are utterly useless, for all that."

"How can clouds be of use?"

"Listen. There is one, very powerful cloud: the cloud-bird Chur. She is the only cloud who is stronger than the Winds of the Desert: she can rise and descend and fly wherever she wants to."

"The cloud-bird Chur? I've never heard of her."

"But the trouble is, I don't know how to call her down from the sky," said White Stallion, with a sigh.

Though everything was bathed in sunshine, the same tiny star was still visible in the sky.

"Do you think that might be Aya?" Paulina asked White Stallion.

"Do you mean that tiny star over there?"

"Yes."

"If it is," the stallion said thoughtfully, "it is just possible she might be able to help. Look! Look!" he said suddenly, interrupting himself. "See?"

Paulina looked upwards, frowning. But all she could see was the same warm, pink sun and the same white, carefree and, apparently useless, clouds floating by it.

"See? Over there, right on the horizon!"

And, indeed, on the horizon there was a cloud that was darker and bigger than the rest. It was floating slowly across the sky in the same direction as the other clouds. Then, suddenly, it did a sharp turn, as if a strong wind was blowing it the other way. It was making for the small star. And now, it was quite clearly taking the shape of an enormous bird with huge wings.

"That's Chur, the cloud-bird! It is very rarely that we have ever caught sight of her in the sky."

"Please make her come here, please make her come here," Paulina said quickly, over and over again to herself. "But, we've still got to find Tom..."

The cloud-bird circled a few times right over the place where the star was, then she appeared to peck the star and Paulina was so terrified, she hid her face in her hands. But White Stallion said to her:

"Don't be afraid. That means the little star is your friend, Aya."

The bird got bigger and bigger and nearer and nearer until, at last, she began circling over the island. She went

round and round, then, suddenly, folding her wings, she swooped downwards. Paulina's heart stood still. She screwed up her eyes.

She only opened them again when she heard someone calling her:

"Paulina!! Paulina!"

Different coloured sparks were jumping and dancing all over the trees, the grass and White Stallion's mane.

"Aya!"

The little girl and the star threw themselves into each other's arms, they were so happy to see each other, they almost cried with joy. They managed not to, though. And, therefore, to this day, we still don't know how stars cry.

Chapter 6. TOM GOES DIGGING. CHUR, THE CLOUD-BIRD, MAKES A PROMISE.

"Paulina!" Aya said, the words tumbling over themselves, she had so much to say. "The mopites nearly finished you off! They wanted to stop you getting to Vardkez's garden where the red and white roses grow! They opened the coach door and the winds carried you away! Hobbler can't stop the train when it is going as fast as that. I was so worried about you! Thank goodness for Chur, the cloud-bird!"

"Aya, I don't understand. Why didn't we ask Chur, the cloud-bird, to help us straight away? Then we could

have done without Hobbler and his peculiar train, or am I wrong?"

"Of course, we could have done. But Chur is not an easy person to deal with. She has a habit of not turning up when she's most needed! It was such a bit of luck that this time she flew right past me. Thank you, Chur," Aya said with feeling, turning to the cloud-bird.

Cloud-bird Chur was white, with grey tips to her wings. She had a head and beak much bigger than the condor even.

"That's enough chat!" she said in a sharp, and it seemed to Paulina, grumpy voice. "If that is your friend, you'd better hurry up and get ready. I'll take you to Steephill and that, I hope, will be the end of the matter. I can't stand being made to fly to places that I'm not intending to go to. I'm not your ferryman."

"I know you've got a heart made of gold, cloud-bird Chur!" Aya laughed. "You're just pretending to be cross!"

"I've already told you: where I fly to is my business, and my business alone. There is nothing I hate more than being stopped. Hurry up!"

White Stallion seemed to be about to address cloud-bird Chur, but the latter's angry outburst, evidently, put him off.

Suddenly, gruesome, dark-blue sparks flashed over the grass and Aya exclaimed in a worried voice:

"Paulina, where is Tom?"

Paulina hung her head.

"He couldn't keep up with the horses and he got lost," she said miserably.

"What? We must find him straight away!" said Aya.

"I'm not waiting for you, that's for sure," the huge bird muttered again. "If we don't leave now, I'll be flying alone."

"Dear cloud-bird Chur, I know you won't do that. How can we possibly abandon our little dog?"

"One shouldn't abandon anyone," the bird continued in the same grumpy voice. "Whether friend, dog, bird, cat, cloud or tree. It is unforgivable to desert any living being."

It was on the tip of Paulina's tongue to ask, "Surely, a cloud isn't alive?", when she remembered just in time that Chur herself was a cloud, for all her grumpiness and vast size.

"Tom, come here!" Paulina called, without any hope that he'd answer though.

It was absolutely quiet. Tom, presumably, was a long way away and, therefore, couldn't hear.

"Tom, Tom, Tom!"

There was no answer. The only noise was White Stallion's even breathing and the angry flapping of Chur's cloud wings.

"Is your dog coming soon? I hope you don't expect me to go and look for it?"

"It's all our fault," White Stallion said in a low voice. "We were so longing for the little girl to stay with us.

It's us who should go and look for Tom. Chur won't be able to find him, because the shadow from her cloud wings will make it impossible for her to see under the leaves. And the leaves grow ever so close together on the island."

He shouted to the other horses and told them to look for Tom.

"Dear cloud-bird Chur, please wait for us. We are bound to find Tom. The mopites were carried away on Hobbler's train. We have no enemies here!"

"You'd better be quick!" Chur muttered.

But how could they be quick? Aya and Paulina ran round the whole area, shaking the long grass stalks, looking under every bush.

Tom was absolutely nowhere to be found!

"Aya," Paulina sobbed, "perhaps we'll never ever find him again?"

Time went by and still there was no Tom. None of the horses came back, either.

"Where I fly to is my business and my business alone, and I can't stand being made to do things that I'm not intending to do. It's not the first time I've told you that, either," Chur said grumpily.

It was clear that if they had to wait much longer, Chur's independent nature would get the better of her kindness and, spreading open her broad white wings with their grey tips, she'd take off into the sky.

Suddenly, from out of the forest, came a loud shout from one of the horses:

"Here! Come here! Quick, come here!"

All of them—apart from cloud-bird Chur who just muttered, "And high time too!"—dashed into the forest. White Stallion went first, followed by Aya and Paulina. White Stallion trotted in the direction the voice had come from, along the shortest path of all, that only he knew of. And from all over the forest, the rest of the horses made for the voice too.

And what did they see?

Tom, alive and full of bounce, not paying the slightest attention to anyone, was digging the earth frantically with both front paws. Sending up black sprays of dust in all directions, he went on burrowing into the ground as if he was a machine. He'd already dug quite a big hole. Evidently, he had scattered all "the dust" that had accumulated over the centuries!

"Tom! Is it you? Tom! We've found you! Oh, how happy I am!" Paulina exclaimed.

But Tom was too engrossed in his work to hear her: he jumped down into the hole and only just managed to scramble out of it again, triumphantly pulling after him something that was very dusty. Laying his trophy at Paulina's feet, he gave himself a good shaking. Paulina bent down and picked up the strange "present". It was a parchment scroll!

Paulina and Aya unrolled it. The horses stood stock-still.

What did it say?

There were no words on it at all, in fact, only a faded

drawing. The drawing was of a bird, and though it was faded and very pale, it looked mighty like cloud-bird Chur. There was also a man in it. And the man, believe it or not, looked vaguely familiar. It was Doctor Dorokhov!

"So, it must be a man, it must be this time!" White Stallion said in an agitated voice. "And that's the Bird! The Bird who is to bring him to us! We must quickly go back to cloud-bird Chur and ask her to help us."

They all set off to where cloud-bird Chur was waiting impatiently.

"Aya, what was it that Tom dug up?" Paulina asked, as they walked along.

"He dug up a scroll that had the predictions of the horses' ancestors on it. It showed a picture of cloud-bird Chur who is to bring the horses their master."

"But why does the master look like Doctor Dorokhov?"

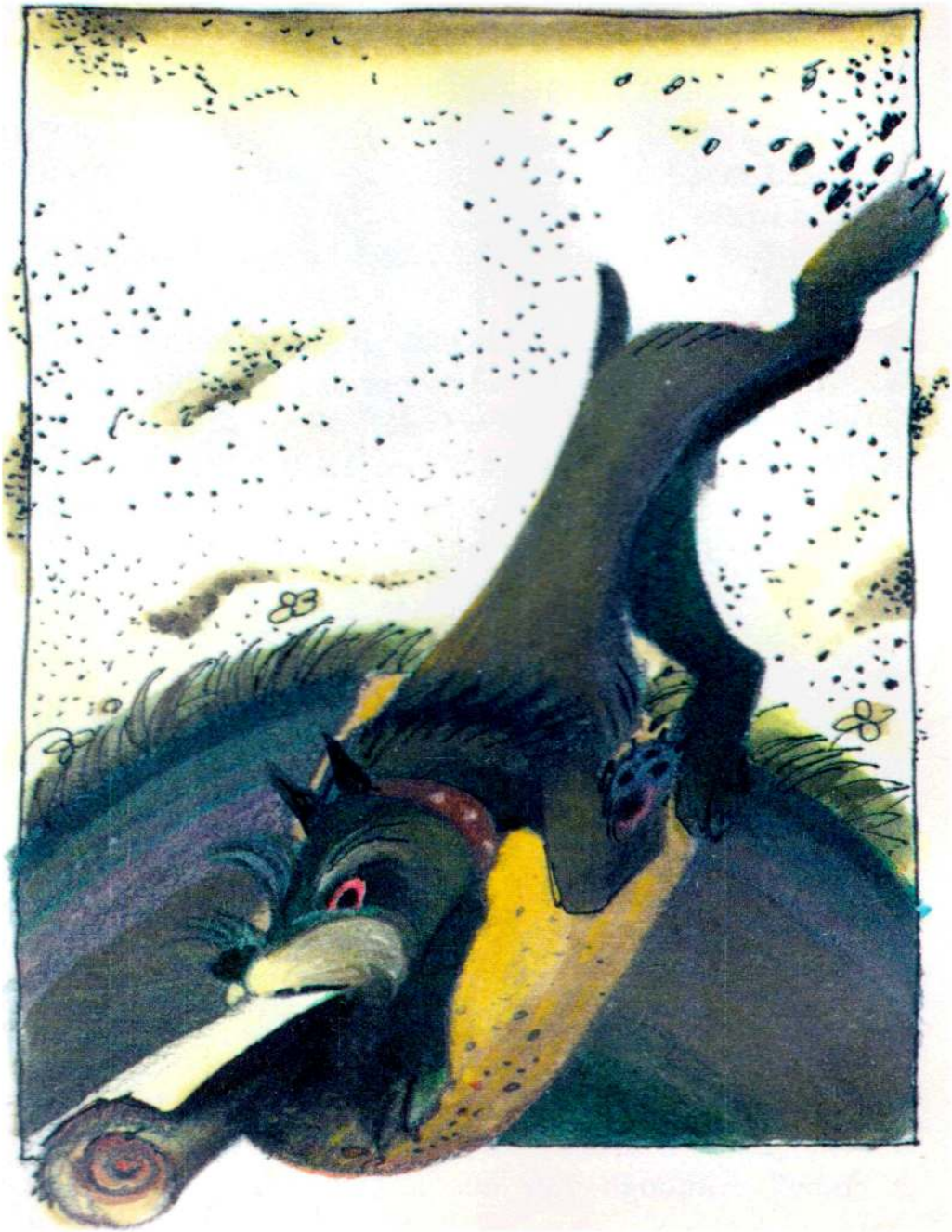
"You're wrong there," said Aya. "The horses' ancestors couldn't possibly have known your Doctor Dorokhov."

"Well, have you found your dog?" cloud-bird Chur cried, as soon as she caught sight of them all. "Let's be off then."

Before either Aya or Paulina had had time to answer Chur, all the horses without exception had surrounded her and White Stallion laid the unfolded scroll down on the ground in front of her.

"What's that?" the cloud-bird asked disdainfully.

Whereupon all the horses, without exception, silently went down on their knees before her.



"What's the big idea? What do you unbearable creatures want from me now?"

White Stallion spoke in a solemn voice:

"Take a good look, cloud-bird Chur! Our ancestors predicted that it would be you who would come to our help and save us."

"And just what might you mean by that, I wonder?" the cloud-bird drawled.

"Take a good look at this man. It is our Master whom we are waiting for and whose praises we sing in our secret song. Bring us our Master, carry him over the Windy Desert. He'll live with us. He'll build himself a house. And at long last we'll start working again, we'll have something to do!"

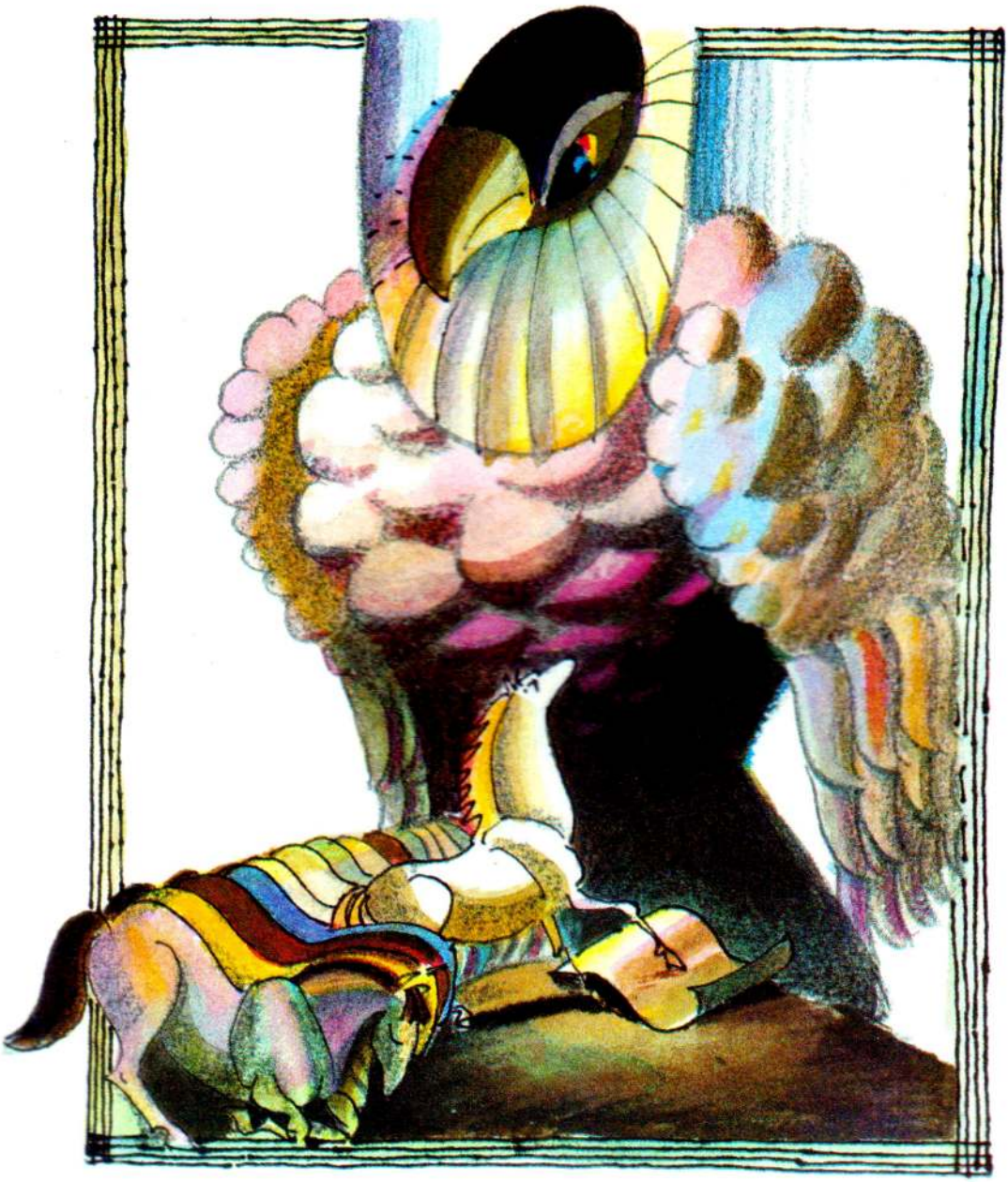
"Generally speaking, where I fly to is my business, and my business alone, and no one has the right to order me about. But since you are all imploring me, I'll give you the following promise. I promise you I'll carry out your wishes when the time comes," said cloud-bird Chur.

"Oh!" all the horses gave a gasp of happiness.

"But, wait, I don't know where to find him, where am I supposed to bring him to you from? Can you tell me where he lives and who he is?"

"No," again all the horses answered at once. "We don't know that."

"Well, alright," said Chur. "A promise is a promise. Cloud-bird Chur doesn't waste words, that would cost me too dear. I'll bring your master to you as soon as he is found. Although I'm not a ferryman," she added

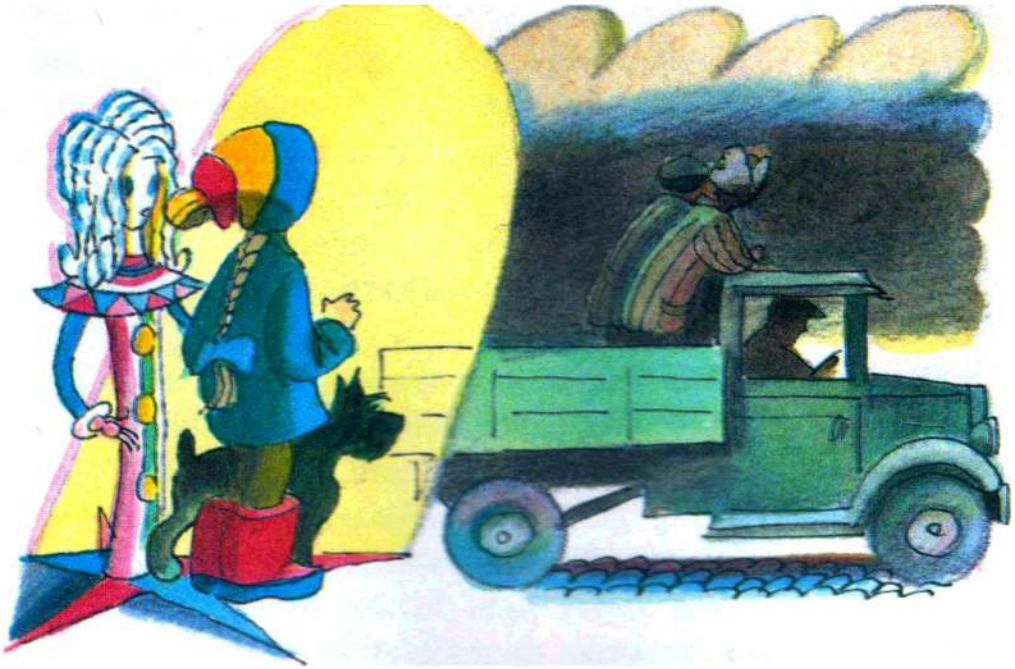


grumpily. "And now quickly say goodbye and we'll be off!" she said to Aya and Paulina. "I trust your dog has finished with his digging?"

And having climbed on to the huge bird's back, Aya, Paulina and Tom began to float up in the air.

Above them was a clear, blue sky, it felt cool and peaceful, while below them, from the evergreen Island of Talking Horses, the words of a song reached them:

Blow, ye winds,
Oh, blow!
Blow ye high and low!
While there's Life,
Heigh-ho!
There is, of course,
Hope.



Chapter 7. WHERE HAS TATAR BRIDGE GOT TO? THE TALKATIVE OLD FERRYMAN.

Cloud-bird Chur flew along smoothly and it wasn't a bit frightening sitting on her back. Her feathers kept the wind off and, therefore, Paulina didn't feel a bit cold. Very soon cloud-bird Chur began to descend and she eventually landed far beyond the town.

"I can't stand landing too close to human towns," she said. "There is always too much chat afterwards. Rumours about flying saucers and so on and so forth. I'm a cloud-bird and I dislike being mistaken for a saucer, even a flying saucer. It's enough that I have brought

you to the straightafterthewar. That was what you asked me to do. Steephill is way over there," and she waved a wing showing the direction they should go in. "Off you go and come back as quick as you can. Where I've got appointments is my business, and my business alone, and because of you I have to keep people waiting. Follow that path and please don't keep me hanging about here more than you have to."

Paulina, Aya and Tom quickly made off in the direction indicated by cloud-bird Chur. It was fairly chilly. The snow had almost melted and here and there small, green tufts of new spring grass had appeared. The path led through a pine forest. The pines didn't grow very close together, so it was fairly light in the forest. The trees kept whispering between themselves and, from time to time, they'd drop long pine needles that were fastened together at one end. The air was beautifully fragrant, a light mist rose from the ground. Ahead one could just make out the edge of the forest. Once they reached it, they'd be able to see where their path led to next. Perhaps they'd catch sight of Steephill in the distance and having quickly walked to it they'd seek out Vardkez and ask him to give them some of his red and white roses.

Paulina suddenly stopped, as if her legs had stuck to the ground. Tom ran over to her and looked up at her face.

"Aya, Aya, oh, how awful!" she cried.

"What's the matter, Paulina?" Aya asked.

"Aya, but we aren't on the Island of Talking Horses anymore!"

"I don't understand," said Aya, "what does it matter?"

"Because the island is evergreen. And here, do you see?"

"What do you mean?"

"Here it is spring, like it was at home. Early spring! March, probably."

"Well, what could be nicer," said Aya. "The air in spring is always beautifully limpid and the stars shine brighter."

"But you don't understand, Aya!" Paulina was losing her temper. "You aren't listening to me!"

"Why are you angry? I can't see what you are getting so worked up about," said Aya.

"It's Vardkez..."

"Don't worry, we'll find him."

"But Aya, surely roses don't grow in March? Oh dear, I'm in such a muddle!"

"I believe that Vardkez's roses grow all the year round. Even in March."

Aya's assured tone somewhat comforted Paulina. Tom, feeling that something was wrong, didn't run off as he'd been about to do, and stayed by his mistress keeping quite quiet.

Soon they arrived at the edge of the pine forest and, in the distance, at the far side of a very, very long field indeed, they saw a town. The town, apparently, was built on a hill and, seen from far away, it looked as

if it was growing upwards like a tree. The houses started at the bottom of the hill and then a bit higher, as if right on top of them, there were more houses.

"Let's be going," Aya said in a determined voice. "That must be Steephill."

They walked for a long, long time along the road that led through the field. Only once did a lorry pass them. It seemed to Paulina to be rather a peculiar lorry: it was so small, it was almost unreal. Coming towards them was a cart and horse. The horse was fairly skinny. The cart rattled over the cobblestones in the road. There were quite a lot of people in it and the horse was pulling it along fairly slowly. After that another cart passed them, it had three huge churns, roped together, in it. The boy-carter was walking along beside the horse, shaking its reins, and saying to it in an encouraging voice:

"Come on, Misha, we're almost home."

Then, hopping up on the cart, he sat sideways on it, whereupon his chestnut Misha ambled along a bit quicker for some reason. No one paid the slightest attention to the three travellers.

Aya walked along in silence so that she wouldn't startle people by the coloured sparks that came shooting out of her mouth when she spoke.

The town was getting nearer and it seemed to Paulina that she even recognized some of the things her Gran had told her about.

There was the old fire-observation tower sticking up in the air. And there, on the bank of the river, were

the ruins of the old monastery, with jackdaws circling over its crooked bell-tower. And right opposite, there should be a bridge across the river.

Gran had told her it was called Tatar Bridge.

Once they came up to the river, Paulina had a fright, for it wasn't a bit like the gentle stream in Gran's stories. The river was almost overflowing its banks, the water in it was a dull, muddy colour and, from time to time, big, jagged lumps of ice would whirl past.

The town began directly beyond the river.

"You talked about a bridge, Paulina, where is it?" Aya asked.

"I don't know. This is where it should be."

Paulina's voice wobbled, she was on the verge of tears again, as she had been many times before on this very tricky journey.

Aya did some thinking.

"I can get across by walking over the water, but you can't. And Vardkez won't talk to me, he'll be too frightened to. It is only children who aren't afraid when stars come up to them and engage them in conversation. Adults are scared out of their wits. And that means you are the one who will have to talk to Vardkez. Cloud-bird Chur won't for the life of her fly any closer, she has already explained to us why."

"Does that mean we'll have to go back without the roses?" asked Paulina, almost in tears again. "Tom won't be able to help us either. Tom!"

Once again, Tom had disappeared! But, before they

had time to be worried or get angry, a sharp yapping broke out somewhere close at hand and a voice could be heard, shouting:

"Who does the dog belong to? Does it bite?"

"Tom! Come here!" Paulina called.

Tom came bounding out from behind a tumbled-down shed on the bank of the river and he was followed by an old man wearing a washed-out, padded jacket and a battered pair of felt boots. He was smoking a funny cigarette—not a cigarette at all, in fact, but a piece of newspaper rolled into a tube, from which unpleasant-smelling smoke emerged.

"Hey, little girl," he said. "Is that your dog?"

"Yes," Paulina answered.

"And where may you be from?"

This question made Paulina blush. She had no idea what to say.

Luckily for them, the old man was fairly talkative and answered his questions himself.

"Who might you be?" he asked, gazing at Aya. "Ah, you must have taken part in the morning performance at the railway school. You are dressed up as a star, I can see that. Mind you don't catch cold, you haven't much on. Your dress is all transparent-like. Why weren't you with the rest of them? I've taken them across already. I'm waiting for the next lot of travellers now. I'm on ferry-duty today."

"Uncle..." Paulina asked in a timid voice. "Uncle, where is Tatar Bridge?"

The old man looked at her in amazement.

"You must go around with your head in the clouds, dear. Don't you see the floods? The ice from the lake suddenly surged into the river and carried the bridge away. They'll put it up again when the water goes down. But how did you"—and he gave Paulina a suspicious look—"get across to school then?"

Paulina went as red as a beetroot again. Once more, the old man helped her out of her difficulty:

"Ah, I see, you must have gone across the railway bridge, and then round on the horse and cart that delivers the bread."

Just to be on the safe side, Paulina quickly nodded.

"Who are you then?"

Paulina didn't understand. She didn't know that in Steephill this was the way they asked people's surnames.

"You a Korovin? They've got a granddaughter much the same as you, all freckled."

Paulina nodded again.

"Ah, well, it can't be helped, hop in, I'll take you across. Eh, what tiny mites you are. The dog coming too?"

"The dog too, the dog too," Paulina rattled out.

"Alright, then. Let's be going. Or your friend will catch her death of cold. She's not very talkative, is she?"

Tied up to the bank was a big dinghy. The old man settled them all down on one seat, there was still plenty of space left on it.

As he rowed quickly across the river, he muttered to himself:

"Decked herself out like a star and there she is, shivering like jelly. It's freezing enough, as it is."

They soon reached the opposite bank. The old man helped them out of the dinghy.

"Uncle," Paulina said, having plucked up her courage once more, "can you tell us the way to Goat's Marsh?"

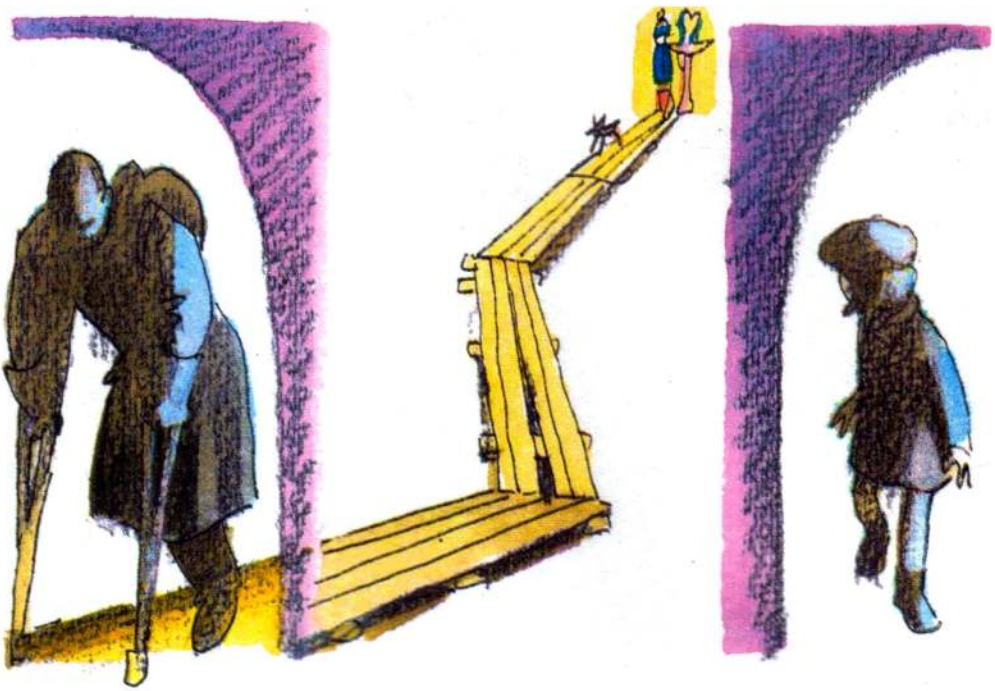
The old man looked surprised:

"But the Korovins don't live at Goat's Marsh. Ah, I see, you want to take your friend home. Haven't you ever been to Goat's Marsh, then? Or perhaps you have and you've forgotten, eh? Follow the river round, then turn into Carriers Road and you'll get to Goat's Marsh. As far as I remember, all the roads in Steephill were given new names, apart from Carriers and Goat's Marsh, that is. And, maybe, Palm Lane."

With a wave of his hand, the old man walked back to his boat.

"Thanks, Uncle," said Paulina.

It took Aya a lot of effort to keep quiet and not thank the kind old man too.



Chapter 8. THE SONG ABOUT THE LITTLE DOG AGAIN. WHO DOES VARDKEZ LOOK LIKE?

They walked along the bank as they had been told to. Paulina was all in a flutter. For this was the very same Steephill that Gran had told her so many stories about. And it wasn't a bit like the postcards which Gran had brought home with her last year, when she'd gone to visit Grandad's grave. Those showed tall blocks of flats as are found all over the place, a new children's theatre with an amusing flat roof and a huge, gleaming metal cock on one of its walls. And in the square there was a

white, stone monument—called an obelisk—in honour of the Steephillians who had lost their lives in the war.

That had been March, 1946. The first postwar spring...

Before them now was the Steephill of Gran's youth. Along the embankment, stood one- and two-story cottages. In fact, there was no embankment, as such, just a slope going down to the river. Each cottage had a small front garden. Here and there from the back yards, came a pleasant smell of smoke—last year's leaves were being burnt. For some reason, the river bank was absolutely deserted. However, that was not quite true, for a man came into sight carrying something in a sack on his back. He only had one leg and he was walking along on crutches. He was going fairly fast, not looking round him, keeping his eyes glued to the ground. Then a little girl ran past. Paulina noticed she had a fairly shabby dress on. The little girl turned round several times and stared at them, even coming to a halt as she did so. Then she shrugged her thin, little shoulders and ran off.

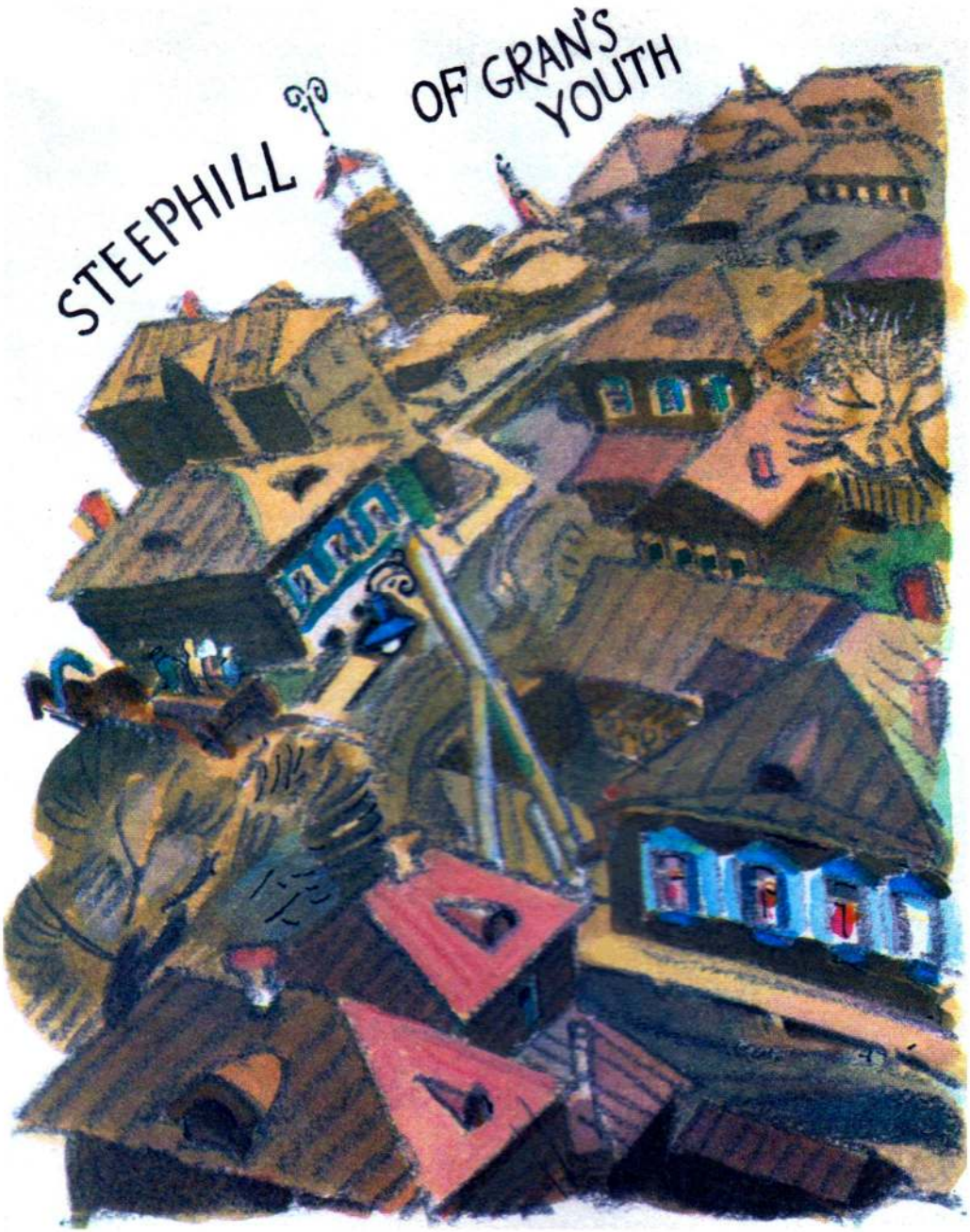
Suddenly, Paulina was sure she could hear Papa's voice, it seemed to be coming from some distance away:

"Miracles don't happen, Taisya!"

Don't happen, indeed! Though perhaps they didn't to grown-ups? Did they just to children then?

Aya's voice broke in on Paulina's thoughts:

"Look, Paulina, Carriers Road. Here's where we have to turn."


STEEPHILL
OF GRAN'S
YOUTH

The green sparks from her voice quickly floated along the wooden wall and high porch of the corner house. By the porch, there was a lilac bush. For a brief second, its bare winter branches were decorated in a lively shimmering green.

They turned down Carriers Road. Here a wooden pavement ran alongside the cottages. The boards were old and, in some places, missing altogether: one could see the spring grass pushing up through the black soil underneath them. A few of the boards were loose and one could hop up and down on them and use them as see-saws.

Tom, of course, immediately got his paw stuck in a crack. Paulina pulled it out with difficulty and Tom yelped, not so much because it hurt as out of cowardice!

Hopping from board to board along the pavement, Paulina looked round her from time to time. And it would have been odd if she hadn't! For this was Steephill! Some of the cottage windows were nice and clean and on the inside sills were geraniums and some other flowers that looked like big bluebells. Others, were covered in dust and unwashed; strips of paper were glued to the panes in crosses. Gran had explained to her that this was done everywhere in order to stop the glass shattering in case they were bombed. They'd walked almost all the way along Carriers and the wooden pavement had come to an end. Another turning appeared on the righthand side: it had no pavement at all and the middle

of the road was a mass of dark ruts filled with water. They took this turning, not really knowing whether they were going the right way. There was no indication of any name on the corner. But on one of the cottages they saw the following sign: "Goat's Marsh, No. 15."

They stopped.

"Paulina! Goat's Marsh! We are going the right way! We are going the right way!"

Aya was ablaze with light, she twirled round and round, sending a volley of sparks shooting over the damp, thawing black earth.

"How clever we are! Very, very soon now, the happy mornings will be back again!" she sang.

And watching her, Paulina cheered up, she danced round and round in circles and very nearly burst out into song too. All of a sudden, she came to a halt:

"Aya! But that's No. 15. Which is his? Gran never told me the number of Vardkez's house. Never, ever!"

"Really," said Aya, quite calmly. "We've got a bit more looking to do then."

They walked down one side of the road. The owners' surnames weren't written on the cottages. And even if they had been this wouldn't have helped, for they had no idea what Vardkez's surname was.

"And there isn't even a single goat," Paulina remarked gloomily.

"Why goat?" Aya didn't understand.

"Think what the road is called."

"Goat's Marsh."

"That's what I'm saying, there isn't one goat here. Perhaps we are in the wrong road? Although it's very muddy, there is no marsh to be seen either."

"Should there be? What did your Gran tell you?"

"Nothing. She didn't say anything about a marsh or goats. All she said was: 'And Grandad used to go all the way from Palm Road to Vardkez in Goat's Marsh. And it was a fair way too!' That was all."

"Well that means we must be in the right road then, anyway. There probably was a marsh here long ago."

"When Tatar Bridge was first built?"

"It could well be."

And Tom, feeling that something wasn't quite right, lost some of his bounce.

"Never mind, Paulina. Remember?

Never lose heart,
Heigh-ho!
Hope against hope!

"Of course I do! It's the magic song of the talking horses. It all seems ages ago now!"

Paulina suddenly remembered that cloud-bird Chur was waiting for them on the other side of the town.

"Aya, come on, we must hurry. Or cloud-bird Chur might fly away and then we'll be left forever in former Steephill!"

"Paulina, you promised you wouldn't be afraid," said

Aya. "What a terrible fusspot you are. Do try and calm down."

They moved on. They walked all the way down the uneven side of the road. They were rather taken aback to find some of the cottages empty. Their dark windows were boarded up. It was obvious that others, though, were lived in. Washing hung on lines. Firewood was stacked in the yards. In some of them, there was a small pile of coal. The cottages had fences round them and in the fences there were gates, some of which had iron rings for handles.

"Paulina, knock on this gate, perhaps somebody will be in," Aya suggested and backed into the shadow.

Paulina knocked. But nothing at all came of this venture.

No one answered the knock.

"That's odd," said Aya. "We seem to have struck a peculiarly deserted hour." And in order to boost Paulina's spirits, she again sang:

Don't lose heart, heigh-ho!
Hope against hope!

But even the coloured sparks given off by her song didn't manage to lure anyone outside.

"Never mind," said Aya. "Let's do the even numbers, now."

And starting at house No. 2, they slowly moved down the even-numbered side of the road. It was the

same thing, all over again. Some houses were boarded up, others showed signs of life. But for some reason no one appeared to be at home.

Then suddenly...

But no, it couldn't possibly be! And, therefore, to begin with, Paulina didn't say a word. It seemed to her that, coming through the high fence of number 22, she could hear someone humming a song, in an undertone:

Little Dog sets sail tomorrow,
Swift's its boat. It's called "A-Hoy".
Grief is never everlasting,
Little Dog will bring you joy.

But it couldn't be... This was the same strange song that her beloved Doctor Dorokhov had sung as he'd gone out of her room!

"Aya," said Paulina in a whisper. "Can you hear anything?"

Aya listened.

"No. Hold on, yes, yes, I can."

And sparks ran along the fence, as she repeated the words of the song:

Little Dog sets sail tomorrow,
Swift's its boat. It's called "A-Hoy".
Grief is never everlasting,
Little Dog will bring you joy.

And she was still singing when the gate flew open of its own accord and a man appeared.

"Who is humming my tune?" he asked in a merry voice.

The man was thin, tall, with dark hair. He seemed to Paulina to be very familiar. It was Doctor Dorokhov! But, no, how silly she was being, of course it wasn't, for Doctor Dorokhov was young and fair-haired. And this man was middle-aged and had dark hair. But it was extraordinary how like he was to Doctor Dorokhov, for all that!

"Paulina!" Aya suddenly shouted. And she shouted so loudly that the whole road lit up as it does when there is a firework display. "Paulina! He is the Master! He is exactly like the man in that drawing on the parchment scroll! He is the Master and Stableman!"

It was quite true, of course, that the man on the parchment scroll had also been rather like Doctor Dorokhov to look at!

"I've never been a stableman, my dears," said the man who was standing in the gateway. "And I know nothing about any scroll. You must be mistaken. I'm called Vardkez. Come along in, and that means you too, dog."

He let them go ahead, and having put the gate on the latch, he led the way up a pebble path to his cottage. Though it was a small cottage it had huge windows. There was nothing in the garden, of course, except for islands of melting snow—certainly no roses!

As they walked up the path Vardkez sang:

Little Dog sets sail tomorrow,
Swift's its boat. It's called "A-Hoy".
Grief is never everlasting,
Little Dog will bring you joy.

And bending down, he patted Tom on the back.

They climbed the steps to the porch, a padded door opened, letting them all into a dark hallway, and then into a beautifully light room.

Vardkez looked carefully at Aya.

"Ah, I see, you're a star," he said. "What's your name?"

"Aya," said Paulina, answering for her.

"Aya? That's a good name for a star," Vardkez said, turning to Aya. "How miraculous that a star came down to earth to visit us and turned into a little girl and made friends with another little girl, a human being. And wanted to make her happy. Surely that is a miracle, isn't it, Freckles?"

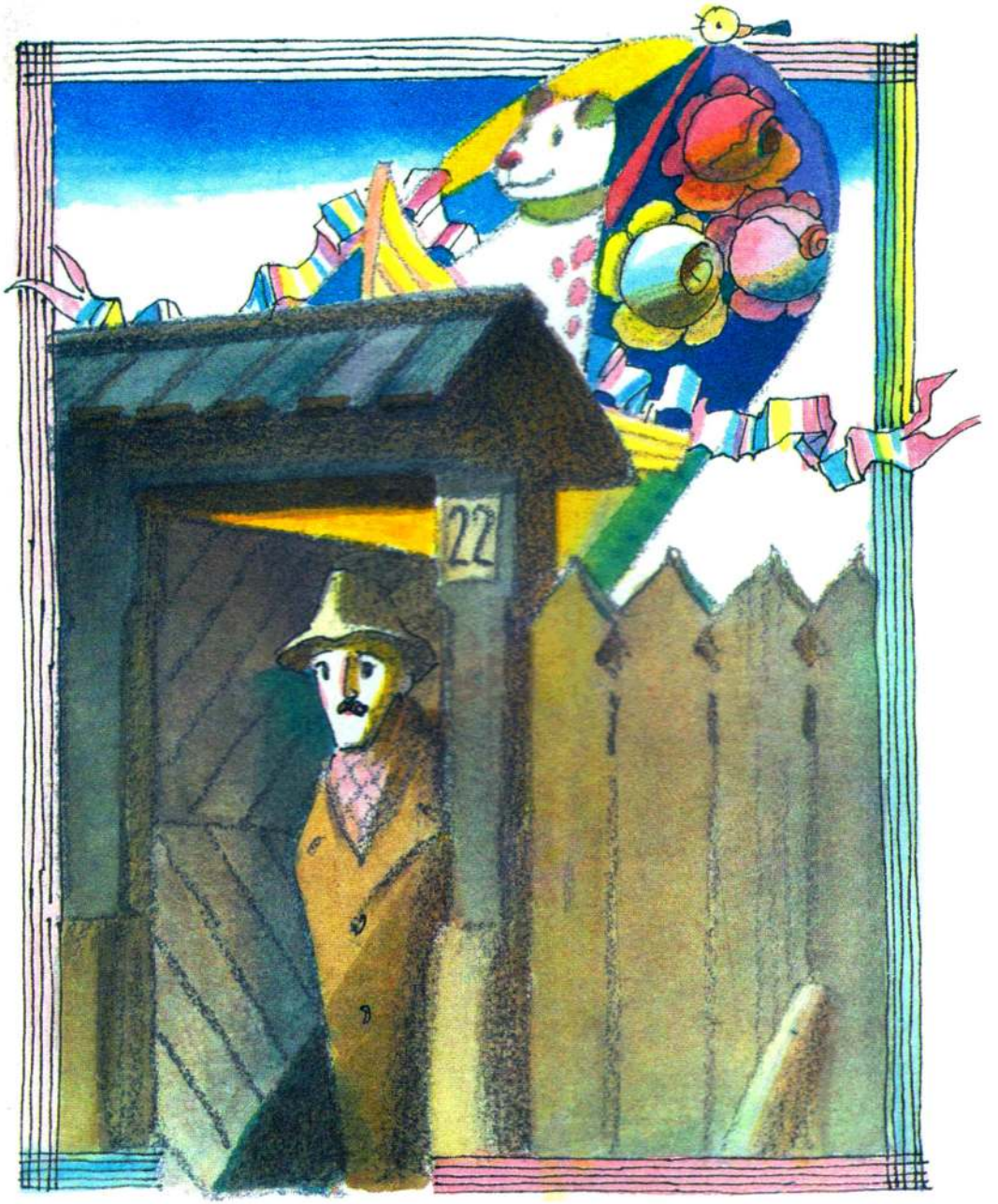
Paulina froze. There was only one person in the whole world who called her that—Doctor Dorokhov.

"I know what you've come for. Follow me."

Vardkez opened another door and there ... but what was there is impossible to describe! There under a glass roof was ... no, not a garden, not a greenhouse, but a rose forest! That's exactly it: A Rose Forest.

On high stalks and swaying ever so slightly, were scarlet-red and snow-white roses!

They were not at all like those that are sold in shops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or at the market. Or even those that grow in the south. Absolutely not. These roses were alive! Not in the sense that they were like people or could talk. No, nothing like that. It was just that they were extraordinarily, palpably beautiful!

"You're quite right, Freckles," Vardkez said again to Paulina. "Quite right. This sort of beauty brings joy and happiness, and people begin to look at things with completely different eyes. And you, I know, are badly in need of these roses."

He smiled mysteriously and winked, just like Doctor Dorokhov had done, the last time he had visited Paulina.

"Oh!" Paulina suddenly gasped. "But we've no money. Not even a kopeck. True, Gran did say..."

"And she was quite right," said Vardkez, interrupting her. "I like giving my roses away, not selling them. This may be because in the language which my mother and father used to speak, the word 'vard' means a 'rose'. And, as you see, that word forms part of my name."

Going up to the roses he appeared to be whispering to them, then he quickly cut a large bunch of red and white roses. He handed them to Paulina.

"What beautiful roses, Paulina!" Aya exclaimed.

Different coloured sparks streamed all over the Rose Forest, and Vardkez said:

"You see, I was right in my guess, you are a star."

At that moment Tom, whom they'd momentarily forgotten about, gave a loud sneeze. The powerful smell

of roses was too strong for his sensitive doggy nostrils and made them ticklish.

They all went back into the room, although the little girls were loth to leave the Rose Forest.

"Well, there we are," said Vardkez, as if expecting his visitors to thank him and leave. But they shuffled their feet and appeared to have no intention of going. He looked at them in surprise. Then he remembered: "Ah, yes. What was it you said just now that I didn't understand, about the master and the stableman? What stableman? I expect he'd like some roses too, wouldn't he? Roses are needed by everyone. Would you like me to pick you a bunch for him as well?"

"No, no," was all Paulina could say. For she realized she wouldn't be able to tell Vardkez the story about the talking horses in a way that would make sense.

And it was Aya who gave him a detailed description of the evergreen Island of Talking Horses, who were miserable without a Master, without a roof over their heads and without anything to do.

Vardkez listened to Aya in silence. Then he asked:

"You say I'm very like him?"

"Exactly like him," Paulina said.

"Well. Tell cloud-bird Chur to come and fetch me at the appointed time. Hopes have to be fulfilled, isn't that true, Freckles? As for the roses, they'll grow even better on the evergreen island."

"Only cloud-bird Chur won't fly to the town to fetch you for anything," said Paulina.

"Never mind," Vardkez said. "I'll find her, never you worry! I'll feel it in my bones when she's coming for me and I'll go and meet her. Tell her that."

And he smiled. It was a beautiful, kind, happy smile.

"Everything will be fine, just you wait and see, Freckles!" he shouted after Paulina.

The gate banged shut so she didn't see him wink again, and this time he winked exactly like Doctor Dorokhov had done.

Chapter 9. THE MOPITES GO INTO THE ATTACK. WHO IS ANELLA?

When they left Vardkez's cottage, Aya, Paulina and Tom went back, or so they thought anyway, the way they had come. The whole road, with its rather unattractive name of "Goat's Marsh", was now filled with the smell of the marvellous roses that Paulina held in her hands. They'd gone quite a long way but there was no sign at all of Carriers Road down which they had to turn. They should have reached the ferry by now. Paulina was worrying again. She couldn't think what reason they could possibly give the kind, old ferryman for wanting to go back across the river.

"What are we going to say to him?" she kept on asking Aya.

"We'll think of some thing or other," Aya replied in a carefree voice.

Paulina hated telling lies. Lying always ended in some sort of unpleasantness!

The road suddenly began to climb up the hill. They turned round the corner and found themselves in a completely different road, which didn't look a bit like Carriers. Half of the plywood sign on which the name of the road was written, was missing. And on the other half, all that was to be seen was: '...arskovo'. There was no making out what that meant.

"Aya, we've got lost!" said Paulina.

"You know, Paulina, when we left Vardkez's cottage, we must have gone the wrong way. Let's go back to where we started from. We must have turned to the right, when we should have turned left."

Calling Tom who was sniffing a broken lamp post, they retraced their steps. But when it seemed to Paulina that they must have got back to Goat's Marsh and they turned round the corner, there on a three-story house, which had the plaster peeling off it and which wasn't whitewashed, was the following sign: "Red Road". Red Road was going uphill again, up and up and up. Several people came towards them, they were in a hurry and Paulina was too timid to ask them the way. Aya did her best to hide behind Paulina. Because it would be next to impossible to explain to an ordinary

person why, if one was a star, one was walking about in a town and speaking, what is more, in coloured words.

Aya and Paulina, having talked it over, decided to retrace their steps and start all over again. They immediately got lost. All the roads for some reason climbed steeply upwards. And strangely enough, on that particular day, there appeared to be very few people in the town.

Paulina twice plucked up her courage to ask the way. The first time, she asked an old woman who was walking along holding a purse, bowl and birch-twig brush in her hands.

"Which is the way to the river, Granma?" she asked.

"To the river, did you say?" the old woman answered willingly. "You lasses had best make for the bath-house. They're stoking it today. There's hot water and all and you'll be able to sit and stew. Lovely!"

But realizing the two little girls weren't going to be sidetracked, she asked:

"Which river is it you are wanting, then? We have three of 'em here. The Tura, the Khripanka and the Svinukha."

Paulina seemed to remember Gran mentioning the Tura.

"The Tura, the Tura," she said hastily.

Instead of replying, the old woman suddenly became curious about Paulina herself:

"You aren't from these parts, are you? You are ever

so clean and well-turned out. Nice new coat you've got on, too. Wherever did your Mum manage to find a fancy coat like that?"

"Bye, Granma," Paulina said hurriedly. "We'll find our own way."

And Paulina, Aya and Tom quickly walked on because, despite Paulina's plaits, it was obvious she was different. That she didn't belong here. It never entered anyone's head, however, that she didn't fit timewise, either. The second person Paulina asked was a little boy who came running past them at full tilt, evidently he was late for something.

"The Tura?" he said. "It's way over there, how come you don't know?" and, waving vaguely into the distance, he immediately disappeared from sight.

Paulina was tired. Tom too, could hardly move his paws. Suddenly they came out into a garden. Having found a bench that wasn't too wet, they sat down. They were surrounded by tall lime trees. Drops of water fell off their bare, wet branches. A chilly, spring breeze was blowing.

Suddenly Paulina was overcome by gloom and anguish.

It seemed to her they would never find the way home, that all their efforts would be in vain, that the roses would wither and that cloud-bird Chur would certainly have flown off, without waiting for them. Aya tried to boost her spirits, but without success.

"Come on, Paulina. What's the matter now?" Aya even began to feel angry with her. They'd been so clever

in getting hold of the roses and there was Paulina as gloomy as could be!

But Paulina couldn't get rid of her black mood.

Suddenly, Aya cried:

"Look, what's that?!"

Bending down towards the bunch of roses which Paulina held, clutched tight in her hands, and carefully lifting something off one of the white flowers, she showed it to Paulina:

"Do you see?"

"I can't see anything!"

"It's a mopite web! A nasty, gloomy web!"

"How can it be? What does it mean?"

"It means that Hobbler stopped the train in Steephill, like he promised he would!"

"Go on, Aya, go on! Please explain it to me."

"Remember how the mopites tagged on to us and how they turned up in the train?"

"Yes, yes, I remember!"

"You realize that they opened the door of the coach so that you and Tom would be blown out?"

"Yes. It felt as if we'd been wrapped up in a sheet."

"That was my doing. I asked a low cloud that was floating past for help."

"Why didn't you fly off with us in the cloud too, then?"

"I had to go back to the sky and seek out cloud-bird Chur. And those little wretches stayed in the train. Hobbler kept his promise and stopped the train where

he'd been asked to. And that's how they came to be in Steephill. And now they are hunting us and doing their best to make the roses wither."

"Where are they now?" asked Paulina in a whisper.

Aya shouted, whereupon the garden became full of light; she then stared carefully at the doors of the cottages.

"They aren't here now. But they won't leave us in peace, all the same. Let's be going, Paulina, come on. It's they who put you in such a bad mood. Come on, quick. By the time they get back, we'll have gone. We'll get ahead of them, then."

Aya pulled Paulina along without any idea of the direction she should go in. Tom loped along behind them.

They soon emerged from the garden and, suddenly, Paulina saw the following words written on a corner house—"Palm Lane".

"Aya!" she cried. "Aya! That was Gran's lane. She and Grandad lived there."

Paulina was overjoyed to be in the lane she knew so well from Gran's stories. She looked and looked and ... suddenly ... the old poplar and maple trees, with their bare, wet branches, began to turn into ... palm-trees. And it wasn't long before Palm Lane had become transformed into a grove of palms. Instead of maples, there were nothing but palm-trees and more palm-trees. And on one of the trees they saw a blue monkey hopping among the palm fronds and turning somersaults! After a few more somersaults, she sat still and, hunching herself

up, fell silent. Perhaps she was thinking, or perhaps she was feeling sad. Paulina and Aya watched her, their eyes starting out of their heads. Then, having got over her bad mood, the monkey shook herself, turned a somersault, and began to sing:

Why are you so blue, my Anella?
Who's stolen the smile from your face?
A monkey that's sad—well, I never!
A very unusual case.

How can you be merrily hopping,
Yet keep up a ponderous mien?
This is not the done thing for monkeys:
No, monkeys aren't given to spleen.

Let pythons long-bodied be dismal,
Let clumsy old hyppo be glum,
Let crocodiles weep out their tears, and
Let yaks be as gruff as they come.

Let porcupines whimper in chorus,
Let parrots be mourning their lives,
But you are a monkey, Anella!
How come you are sad? You should smile!

Oh, maybe you're starving, my darling?
Just look at the neighbouring tree!
There's lots of bananas a-hanging—
Take all if you want, and for free.

All monkeys are auburn in colour.
Why, then, is my Anella so blue?
A very unusual coating,
*Befitting the chosen few.**

And the monkey, still somersaulting and jumping from tree to tree, burst out laughing and her laughter was so infectious, and she pulled such an incredibly funny face, that Paulina and Aya couldn't help laughing too. They laughed and laughed and laughed and the coloured, gleaming sparks of Aya's laughter scattered all over the palm grove and even Tom wagged his crooked stump of a tail.

"That's it!" said the monkey. "Our laughter has got rid of them."

"Got rid of whom?" Paulina asked.

"The mopites!" Aya guessed.

"Quite right!" said the monkey. "You can run off now, wherever you are going. It's quite safe."

"How can we get to the Tura?" Paulina asked.

"Keep on going downhill," the monkey answered.

"Thank you," Aya and Paulina replied, both at once.

"For nothing," said the monkey, "don't mention it! And don't forget I'm called Anella! Happy journey!"

No sooner had the monkey finished speaking, than the grove of palm-trees immediately disappeared and

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* Translated by L. Kirzhner.— *Ed.*

once more they found themselves in Palm Lane and saw that, just as the monkey had said, it went downhill. They ran down it and very soon they arrived on the river bank, coming out right at the place where the old ferryman sat in his boat.

What a remarkable old man he was! He would answer his questions himself.

"You going back across, again? To school?" he asked.

Paulina realized she had no plausible answer to give him.

But the old man went on:

"Well done, that's a lovely bunch you've got. Miss Elizabeth will be delighted. She's a good teacher, she's been at it for years, taught any number of kids, she has."

He quickly rowed them across the turbid Tura with its lumps of floating ice. They knew the way back across the field and, therefore, it seemed to them to be shorter than it had the first time. They'd made it. Where was cloud-bird Chur? Surely she hadn't... But no, there she was, all white with grey under her wings, and really angry too.

"At last," she said. "Where I've got appointments is my business, and my business alone. They can't wait forever, you know."

But seeing the roses, she stopped being angry.

"Beauty melts stone," she added somewhat mysteriously.

Getting in a muddle and interrupting each other, afraid that cloud-bird Chur would get angry again,

Paulina and Aya told her about the man whose picture was on the parchment scroll.

"He lives in Steephill, in the straightafterthewar," Aya said. "And he is called Vardkez."

But surprisingly enough, cloud-bird Chur didn't get angry. She just said:

"A promise is a promise. Cloud-bird Chur doesn't waste words. When the time comes, I'll carry him to the Island of Talking Horses, despite the odd name he has got, Vardkez. Very unusual. Well, be quick. Where do you want to go? Back to town again? To another one? To the here and now town? No, kindly spare us that. Or I'll again be mistaken for a flying saucer, or a saucepan or, even worse, a sauce-boat!"

"You drop us in the mushroom wood, cloud-bird Chur," said Aya. "It is not a here and now wood, it's a magic wood. We'll make our own way home from there."

Chapter 10. HOME AGAIN! WHAT AMAZING DREAMS THERE ARE IN THIS WORLD!

Having arrived at the mushroom wood, Aya, Paulina and Tom said goodbye to cloud-bird Chur. They thanked her with all their heart, but she immediately flew off, not waiting to listen to them.

"Tom," said Aya, "you remember the way from the mushroom wood, don't you?"

It was night in the wood, as it had been at the start of their journey. Paulina put Tom on the lead and he quickly ran along, sniffing at the ground, showing Paulina and Aya where to go. All Paulina was aware of, was a very strong smell of mushrooms.

Aya was singing and, therefore, it was quite light enough to see the path.

You and I tiptoed quietly
Into time well out of mind.
And a bunch of scarlet roses
That we sought we found alright.

A silver light pours from the sky.
Don't be scared, don't take fright.

The smell of mushrooms came to an end.

"Here we are!" Aya said loudly.

And suddenly everything round about went dark, Paulina couldn't see anything and her eyes closed of their own accord. And when they opened again... But what was this?

Gran was standing by Paulina's bed, shaking the thermometer.

"Have you woken up, then, dearie?" she said in a kind voice. "Let's take your temperature!"

Paulina didn't answer. Had it all just been a dream, then? Nothing but a dream? She was on the point of frowning, when suddenly from a long way away, no, that's not right, how should one put it? On the contrary, from inside her, came the following song:

Why are you so blue, my Anella?
Who's stolen the smile from your face?

A monkey that's sad—well, I never!
A very unusual case.

And Paulina laughed.

In the meantime her temperature had been taken and it turned out she didn't have one. So there was nothing to be worried about.

"Our walk won't do you any harm," she remembered Aya's words. It had been some walk, alright!

"That's good, you don't have a temperature. Do you remember what date it is tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

Oh, yes, of course, tomorrow was the twenty-third of March—Mama and Gran's birthday.

And Paulina remembered how she'd hidden her pictures in the bookcase in the third volume of the Children's Encyclopaedia. One of them was of palm-trees in Africa and on one of the trees there was a blue monkey.

"Anella," Paulina whispered.

The other drawing was of horses grazing on the edge of a forest.

"I wonder how the talking horses are?" Paulina thought. "Has cloud-bird Chur already brought Vardkez to them? How will I ever know? Surely it wasn't just a dream? It can't have been..."

"Gran," Paulina said. "Where are Papa and Mama?"

She wanted to check up on the mopites.

"At work, dear. It's very late, you slept a long time. Now you and I are going to have breakfast. Doctor Dorokhov said you must drink warm milk with honey."

While Gran was in the kitchen, warming up the milk, Paulina went on thinking:

"Was it a dream, or wasn't it? And what about Aya, the little girl-star? She is so kind, she is my new friend."

Gran came back and, having given Paulina her milk, sat on the edge of the bed.

"Gran," said Paulina. "Do you know, I dreamt that in Steephill there is no Tatar Bridge."

"What do you mean? Where has it gone to, then?"

"You see, the Tura was so flooded that the bridge was carried away and they take people across by boat!"

Gran stared at Paulina in astonishment. She remained silent for such a long time that Paulina even became frightened and cried:

"Gran!"

"But Paulina, that's exactly what used to happen! I never told you about it, though, so how could you possibly know?"

"Tell me about it now!"

"In the old days, before they built the new iron bridge across the river, the wooden one would be carried away each spring, as soon as it flooded."

"Then what would happen?"

"And then, as you said, they'd ferry people across in boats to the goods station and to the railway district. They even took the children across to school."

"And after that?"

"After that they'd put a new bridge up, till the next lot of spring floods. But, tell me, how did you know about it?"

"I told you, I saw it in a dream."

"What amazing dreams there are in this world," Gran said and she even shook her head.

"And Gran," Paulina went on, "to get to Goat's Marsh from Carriers Road one has to turn a corner, doesn't one?"

"Wait, let me think. From Carriers, yes, that's right. Who told you that?!"

"I dreamt about it."

Gran shrugged her shoulders. She didn't believe very much in dreams.

"Gran, as I haven't got a temperature, can I go outside to the yard?" Paulina asked.

"Certainly not, child!" Gran said, raising her hands in the air, and Paulina realized that any further attempts to persuade her would be useless.

And she wanted to go outside so much. For who could tell, Tom might be waiting for her round the corner.

Papa and Mama came home together and not very late. They were carrying big bags full of everything under the sun. Tomorrow, after all, there were two birthdays to be celebrated!

Papa wasn't frowning. He ran straight in to see Paulina, singing:

Paulinette, Paulinotte
Can you hear me or not?
Yes, I do, and so what?

When he sang this song—evidently, these were the only lines of it he could remember—it meant he was in a good mood.

Then Mama came in to see Paulina and gave her her medicine. Paulina realized that she wouldn't have a chance to tell her about her amazing dream for Mama had a hundred and one things to do about the house. She just asked Paulina:

"What do you think, shall I make a rainbow cake, or is it too much bother?"

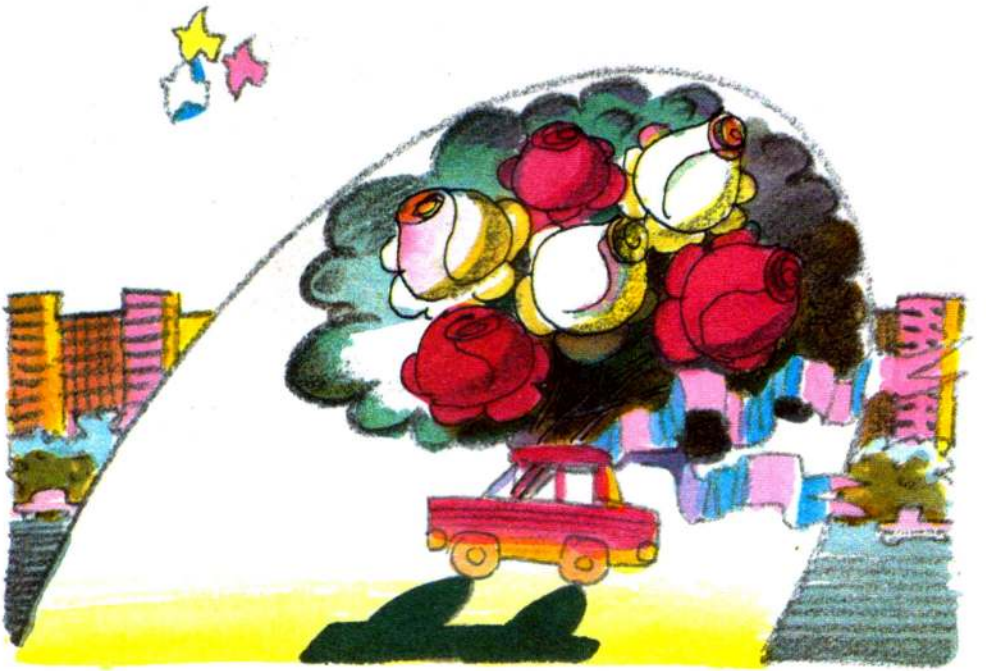
"Make one, make one," Paulina said in a decisive voice.

She liked it when Mama, putting an apron on and a white kerchief over her hair, baked things in the oven. First, because they were always delicious to eat and, secondly, because then, she was much more like Mama than when she went on and on editing her "noddle verbs" without a break the whole evening.

The evening passed very quickly. Paulina was allowed into the big room to watch the cartoons on the telly. True, they weren't very interesting, nor were they a bit funny, either: some hideous creatures, playing make-believe, not proper hockey, kept on shouting: "Goal, goal!"

When it had got quite dark, Paulina tiptoed to the window and pulled back a corner of the blinds. She wanted to look at the sky. Perhaps the special star would be there that only she could see. But the sky was covered in cloud.

Paulina sighed and went off to bed.



Chapter 11. THE HAPPY MORNING IS BACK AGAIN!

By the morning, the clouds had disappeared. Paulina woke early and the first thing she did was to rush over to the window. There was a clear sky. And in it she could see ... one little star twinkling!

"Aya!" Paulina called in a low voice.

The star went on twinkling as before. Of course, it was ridiculous to think that it could hear Paulina at that distance. Although Aya had told her that the sky was much closer to the earth than it seemed.

"Ask the spacemen!" she had said.

Paulina quietly got dressed, went over to the bookcase where her own books were kept, and got out the two pictures which were hidden in volume three of the Children's Encyclopaedia.

On one of the pictures the following words were written: "To my darling Mama, HAPPY BIRTHDAY! And I hope you will always be well and happy." And on the other one, just: "To dear Gran, from Paulina. On her birthday." On both pictures the date, March the twenty-third, was nicely chalked in, in red pencil.

She put both the drawings down, side by side, on the table. And began to wait for the rest of the household to wake up.

After a while, she heard Papa, trying not to make a noise, come out into the hall and, carefully unlocking the door, go out.

Where could he be going to? Today was Saturday, after all! Surely he wasn't going to work, to do overtime, or something else equally ridiculous! No, he couldn't be! For it was Gran and Mum's birthday today!

"Oh!" Paulina cried so loudly that she put her hand over her mouth. "He's forgotten! He's probably forgotten all about Gran and Mama's birthday." She was close to tears. Yes, he'd forgotten!

Papa's Zhiguli purred under the window and raced off. Silence descended again. After a time, footsteps and the creaking of a door could be heard. Gran came out of her room. Then Mama quickly ran into the kitchen.

And suddenly! Suddenly, the doorbell went: someone was ringing it very loudly, indeed.

"Jingle, jangle, jingle, jangle!" it went.

It's probably a telegram, Paulina thought. From Mrs. Wanda Bamburskaya. She always sent a telegram, although she lived on the same landing as they did.

Mama hurried to the door. The door opened.

"Ooh!" Mama could be heard exclaiming from the corridor. Then she called Gran in a loud voice: "Mum! Mum! Look!"

Papa's voice could also be heard, though Paulina couldn't make out what he was saying. Paulina couldn't stop herself and she shouted:

"Ma! Pa! Gran!"

All three immediately appeared in Paulina's room.

Papa was holding in his hands a huge bunch of beautifully fresh red and white roses!!!

Papa smiled gaily as he held out the roses to Mama and Gran:

"With all my very best wishes on your birthday, my dears!" And with that he kissed first Mama and then Gran.

Gran had tears in her eyes. She didn't cry, though, she smiled.

"My dear, where did you find such beautiful roses?! Vera, do you remember how your Dad used to bring us roses like this from Vardkez!"

Paulina couldn't help shouting:

"But these roses do come from Vardkez!"

Gran stroked her hair, saying:

"What a silly thing you are."

And Papa said:

"You know a very charming Armenian sold them to me. And very cheap, what is more!"

After that Paulina showed Mama and Gran her pictures, explaining to them as she did so:

"That's Palm Grove. And that's The Island of Talking Horses."

Everyone liked the pictures very much indeed.

Paulina felt absolutely well again but, even so, Mama rang Doctor Dorokhov. He said he'd look in later.

There was a happy bustle going on indoors: they were preparing for visitors. Everyone was hurrying about, talking, carrying things. But even so, they all found time to stop for a minute or two in front of the vase with the extraordinary roses in it.

Papa was carrying a pile of plates into the big room when suddenly he stumbled and three plates broke at once. Paulina froze. Any minute now the happy morning would be spoilt.

Nothing of the sort, though! Gran said it was a lucky omen to break crockery on holidays, and Papa suddenly said:

"Vera, I'm always tripping over that carpet, what about rolling it up?"

Mama was quite taken aback, for it had been Papa who had wanted a carpet in the room.

"It seems to me that a parquet floor is both prettier

and cleaner. What do you think? Let's sell the carpet!"

And now it was Paulina's turn to be surprised by her Mama for she went up to Papa and, giving him a big kiss, said:

"Alright, then."

At that point the bell rang. This time the visitor was for Paulina. It was Doctor Dorokhov.

"Well, how are things, Freckles?" he asked.

"Fine," Paulina said and stared hard at Doctor Dorokhov.

Not taking any notice of Paulina's gaze, however, he examined her, listening to her chest and even looking down her throat which she hated because she always felt as if she was choking.

"Yes, you're fine," Doctor Dorokhov said.

Then he went over to the table and looked at Paulina's pictures.

"Listen," he said, "where's the stableman? Someone has to look after the horses!"

And as quick as could be, before Paulina had had time to look round even, he had drawn a man beside the horses, who was a bit like Doctor Dorokhov himself to look at and even more like Vardkez. By the time Doctor Dorokhov had finished his drawing, Paulina realized that cloud-bird Chur had kept her promise. The Island of Talking Horses now had a Master.

Doctor Dorokhov said goodbye and left.

The bustle in the house went on.

"Vera!" Papa was calling Mama again. "Since we've decided to get rid of that carpet, why don't we buy a dog? Paulina has been asking for one for such a long time!"

Paulina didn't hear what Mama said, but she knew now that she would be given a dog with black, sticking-up ears and a stumpy tail and that this dog, as a matter of fact, already existed and it was called Tom.

Paulina went over to the window of her room. Though she could only just make it out, there was a star twinkling in the sky.

"Aya," Paulina said, "Aya! The happy morning has come back again!" And keeping quiet for a while, she added: "Come back and see me one day, Aya!"

THE END